

members.f4wonline.com

January 2, 2020 Observer Newsletter: History of NJPW at the Tokyo Dome | Wrestling Observer

677-861 minutes

Wrestling Observer Newsletter

PO Box 1228, Campbell, CA 95009-1228 ISSN10839593 January 6, 2020

When the Tokyo Dome opened on March 17, 1988, the idea of pro wrestling there wasn't even an idea.

The Dome was built to be the new modern home of two baseball teams, the Yomiuri Giants of the Central League, the team of Shigeo Nagashima and Sadaharu Oh years earlier, the unofficial national team that had all its games on NTV, and sold out every game. The Dome held 48,316 fans for baseball, but for years, every single Giants game announced the attendance as 56,000. The other team, the Nippon Ham Fighters of the Pacific League, which played there through the 2003 season, were the ones that the average person could get tickets to see.

The idea was baseball and concerts, the Rolling Stones (who have 19 Tokyo Dome sellouts), Michael Jackson (who sold 405,000 tickets for nine dates in December 1988), U2, Madonna and Japanese artists. But while it has housed numerous sporting events, including NFL and Major League Baseball, with the exception of baseball and concerts, it's probably best known for pro wrestling.

Pro wrestling was still huge on television back then. All Japan, headed by Giant Baba, was a fixture on Nippon TV, one of the major networks. New Japan, on TV-Asahi, had matches airing in prime time. But live shows maxed out at Ryogoku Sumo Hall, which held 11,066, and Nippon Budokan Hall, which held 16,000 and while All Japan drew healthy crowds and both companies charged, based on the standard of the times (but not now) incredibly high ticket prices and did gates unheard of in the U.S. except for WrestleMania shows, the idea of running stadium shows didn't feel necessary or even prudent. The mentality at that time is you weren't going to draw more than 25,000 people, so both for look and profit margin, selling out Budokan Hall, which itself wasn't easy, was the better bet.

But New Japan Pro Wrestling made a deal with the Russian government. At the time, as funny as this would sound to NHL fans, no Russian athletes were allowed to compete in international sports. But an economic disaster in that country changed that. Ironically it was not the NHL that made the first deal, but a pro wrestling company in Japan, which made a deal to bring in a

number of national champion and Olympic caliber wrestlers and judokas, to build for matches against New Japan stars on April 24, 1989, at the Tokyo Dome. This was an event that got a ton of national publicity, and on a worldwide basis, got some major coverage as well. New Japan didn't sell out. Nobody expected that was possible. They announced 53,800 fans, which was an exaggeration by about 10,000, and not all of them were paid. But it was still the largest crowd ever to attend Japanese wrestling, beating the record set by the October 7, 1957, match with Lou Thesz defending the NWA title against Rikidozan at Korakuen Stadium, an outdoor stadium within 50 yards of what is now the Tokyo Dome, which drew 35,000 fans.

The last truly major stadium show was August 14, 1967, when Giant Baba defended the International heavyweight championship against NWA champion Gene Kiniski, which drew 25,720 fans, and went to a 65 minute draw in what is generally considered the greatest match of Baba's career.

The show with the Russians was thought to be a one-and-done. Not that it would never happen again, but it would be rare.

In 1988, a third promotion formed in Japan, it was the second version of the UWF, which had been around 1984-86. They were selling out all their arena shows the first day tickets were put on sale, and then did 23,000 people into the stadium in Osaka.

They ran the Tokyo Dome on November 29, 1989, and sold out, announcing 60,000 fans (really 50,000) in three days after selling 40,000 tickets the first day. Akira Maeda, the group's biggest draw, faced Willie Wilhelm, a European judo champion, in the main event. One of the participants on the show was a 21-year-old former college wrestling star named Minoru Suzuki, who lost via knockout to Maurice Smith, the world heavyweight kickboxing champion in what was billed as a wrestler vs. Kickboxer mixed match. Suzuki would go on to headline the Tokyo Dome decades later against Hiroshi Tanahashi. Smith would eventually win the UFC heavyweight championship and was later inducted into the company's Hall of Fame.

With a small promotion with no television selling out the Dome, besides the huge changes it made on the business as a whole (Japanese wrestling was built around the biggest matches usually ending with double count out or disqualification finishes and top guys almost never did clean jobs, unless it was blow-off, the UWF went with all submission or knockout finishes and forced All Japan and New Japan to change), they had sold out the Tokyo Dome, something New Japan couldn't do.

New Japan booked a second show on February 10, 1990, with NWA champion Ric Flair vs. Keiji Muto as the main event. There were all sorts of business problems with Flair and WCW. Flair wanted extra from WCW to appear. It turned into a mess. The match fell apart. With a dome to fill and the main event falling off, New Japan President Seiji Sakaguchi went to Giant Baba for help. While Baba and Antonio Inoki were rivals, more often than not bigger, Baba and Sakaguchi got along better. Baba agreed to send talent, and really, the three big matches on the show were All Japan's Jumbo Tsuruta & Yoshiaki Yatsu facing New Japan's Kengo Kimura & Osamu Kido, a win for All Japan; All Japan's Genichiro Tenryu & Tiger Mask (Mitsuharu

Misawa) facing Riki Choshu & George Takano, another win for All Japan, and IWGP champion Big Van Vader facing All Japan's biggest foreign star in its history, Stan Hansen, in a title match that went to a double count out and became famous because Hansen knocked Vader's eye out of its socket in an incredibly stiff match. New Japan legitimately sold out, drawing 53,000 fans, the day after one of the most famous boxing matches of all-time, Buster Douglas' heavyweight title win over Mike Tyson, drew 30,000 fans.

Ric Flair, the WCW & NWA champion, headlined the third show, on March 21, 1991, against IWGP champion Tatsumi Fujinami before 54,500 fans, on a U.S. PPV show called "Starrcade in Tokyo Dome." It set the all-time attendance record for the country, and soon after, a fourth date was announced for January 4, 2002, to start a tradition.

Over the years, New Japan worked with various different companies. It worked with WCW in the 90s, TNA in the 00s and ROH in recent years, as well as the famous shows with the UWFI, the Kensuke Sasaki vs. Toshiaki Kawada led IWGP title tournament in 2001, and less famous shows with Big Japan and WAR.

Like WrestleMania, which was huge through 1992, then cooled off until hitting rock bottom in 1997 and then becoming an institution, the Tokyo Dome annual show, named WrestleKingdom in 2007, had its ups and downs. It was a huge event through 2002, and then as the promotion went down, it got so bad that there were shows that sold less than 10,000 tickets and one year they couldn't even give tickets away. It rebuilt on the back of Hiroshi Tanahashi's feud with Kazuchika Okada. Last year's show, featuring Tetsuya Naito challenging Okada for the IWGP title and the Chris Jericho vs. Kenny Omega match, it drew the largest actual paid attendance in 17 years, and due to the latter match, gained more worldwide attention than any Tokyo Dome in history, with about 2,500 fans flying in for the show. It's not WrestleMania, but it's really the biggest thing in wrestling other than that. But if you're talking show quality, in recent years, WrestleKingdom has been it. But that is a new phenomenon. A lot of the early Dome shows were very good, and like WrestleMania, some years were also terrible.

The Tokyo Dome an event of the year winners in the early days, but neither were New Japan shows. An April 11, 1990, show really a joint promotion by All Japan's Giant Baba and WWF's Vince McMahon, which also had some New Japan cooperation, was a winner, headlined by Hulk Hogan vs Stan Hansen. Pro Wrestling NOAH won shows of the year in the building in 2004 and 2005. The first New Japan show to take that award was in 2015, but it started a streak of four straight years that is in tact going into this week's show.

Match of the year winners from the Tokyo Dome:

1991 - Rick & Scott Steiner over Hiroshi Hase & Kensuke Sasaki

2004 - Kenta Kobashi over Jun Akiyama

2015 - Shinsuke Nakamura over Kota Ibushi

2016 - Hiroshi Tanahashi over Kazuchika Okada

2017 - Kazuchika Okada over Kenny Omega

Tokyo Sports match of the year winners from a New Japan show at the Tokyo Dome

1993 - Genichiro Tenryu over Riki Choshu

2000 - Toshiaki Kawada over Kensuke Sasaki

2002 - Yuji Nagata over Yoshihiro Takayama

2017 - Kazuchika Okada over Kenny Omega

That three-year streak will almost surely be broken, even though the Omega vs. Jericho match at the time looked like a strong contender, before the year just got ridiculous.

We went from the big business era with wrestling having great television exposure era of the 90s, so the down period and decline to a risk of death in the 00s, to the comeback and the great show era that started around 2011 or 2012, and got ridiculous around 2015.

Of all the 1/4 shows, to me, the biggest was 1996 with the Keiji Muto vs. Nobuhiko Takada rematch. It was far, far from the best, but it sold out two weeks in advance. 1993, selling out one week in advance for Riki Choshu vs. Genichiro Tenryu would have been the second biggest.

To the best of our knowledge, the most-watched 1/4 Tokyo Dome match on television would have been the 1997 Choshu vs. Shinya Hashimoto match with 18 million viewers, but that was in prime time. The most impressive number was more than 11 million viewers from 12:20 a.m. to 12:35 a.m. on a Tuesday night for the 2000 Naoya Ogawa & Kazunari Murakami vs. Hashimoto & Takashi Iizuka match.

The five best shows were all recent, I'd go in this order:

1. 2018
2. 2015
3. 2013
4. 2017
5. 2016

As far as the ten best matches:

1. Kenny Omega vs. Kazuchika Okada 2017
2. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Kenny Omega 2019
3. Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Kota Ibushi 2015
4. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Kazuchika Okada 2016
5. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Kazuchika Okada 2015
6. Kenny Omega vs. Chris Jericho 2018
7. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Kazuchika Okada 2013

8. Shinsuke Nakamura vs. A.J. Styles 2016

9. Kushida vs. Will Ospreay vs. Marty Scurll vs. Hiromu Takahashi 2018

10. Katsuyori Shibata vs. Tomohiro Ishii 2016

For the prior generation, the standouts were Sting & Great Muta vs. Steiner Brothers in 1992 and Steiners vs. Muto & Hiroshi Hase in 1994, as well as Antonio Inoki vs. Big Van Vader in 1996 that come to mind. Although to me, at best you could put one of them in the No. 10 position and even then you have to give them the benefit (that is probably deserved) of time and place in the sense based on the style they were supposed to work at the time, they were awesome matches.

The most Hall of Famers for any New Japan show at the Tokyo Dome was the February 10, 1990, show, with 14. They were Chris Benoit, Jushin Liger, Hiroshi Hase, Steve Williams, Masa Saito, Jumbo Tsuruta, Genichiro Tenryu, Mitsuharu Misawa, Riki Choshu, Big Van Vader, Stan Hansen, Antonio Inoki, Shinya Hashimoto and Masahiro Chono. It's 15 if you include referee Lou Thesz.

The all-time record for a Tokyo Dome show would be the multi-promotional show put on by Weekly Pro Wrestling in 1995, with 15, and a group of talent unique to any show in history, with Devil Masami, Aja Kong, Manami Toyota, Terry Funk, Mick Foley, Minoru Suzuki, Akira Maeda, Nobuhiko Takada, Atsushi Onita, Misawa, Kenta Kobashi, Hansen, Toshiaki Kawada, Hashimoto and Chono.

The fewest was four, with those being January 4, 2003, January 4, 2017 and January 4, 2019. The two recent shows will no doubt end up with more. The 2003 show only had Jushin Liger, Shinsuke Nakamura, Chono and Yuji Nagata.

The 2017 show had Liger, Nagata, Nakamura and Tanahashi. But legit candidates either now or perhaps later on that show include Okada, Ibushi, Omega and Naito, and many others like the Young Bucks, Hiromu Takahashi, Will Ospreay, Tomohiro Ishii and Katsuyori Shibata (if you figure in training) are also possibilities down line. Similarly, 2019 had Nagata, Suzuki, Chris Jericho and Tanahashi as well as names like Ospreay, Ibushi, Ishii, Okada, Naito, Young Bucks and Omega.

The wrestlers with the most actual main event matches on New Japan shows at the Tokyo Dome, not including the upcoming shows, are:

11 - Hiroshi Tanahashi

8 - Keiji Muto, Shinsuke Nakamura

7 - Shinya Hashimoto

5 - Yuji Nagata, Kazuchika Okada, Kensuke Sasaki

4 - Masahiro Chono, Antonio Inoki, Satoshi Kojima, Yoshihiro Takayama

3 - Riki Choshu, Kazuyuki Fujita, Naoya Ogawa, Nobuhiko Takada, Genichiro

Tenryu, Hiroyoshi Tenzan

2 - Jun Akiyama, Toshiaki Kawada, Tatsumi Fujinami, Don Frye, Brock Lesnar, Kenny Omega, Seiji Sakaguchi, Bob Sapp, Minoru Suzuki

This doesn't include other promotions Tokyo Dome shows including the Hashimoto vs. Chono match that headlined the Weekly Pro Wrestling show.

Wrestlers with multiple IWGP heavyweight title matches at the Tokyo Dome are:

9 - Hiroshi Tanahashi

8 - Keiji Muto

6 - Kazuchika Okada

5 - Shinya Hashimoto, Yuji Nagata, Shinsuke Nakamura, Kensuke Sasaki

4 - Yoshihiro Takayama

3 - Masahiro Chono, Tatsumi Fujinami, Nobuhiko Takada

2 - Riki Choshu, Kazuyuki Fujita, Satoshi Kojima, Brock Lesnar, Tetsuya Naito, Kenny Omega, Big Van Vader

Okada will jump to seven, or eight, this week.

The wrestlers with multiple top three on the card matches, which really shows longevity at the top in the promotion:

21 - Masahiro Chono, Keiji Muto

19 - Hiroshi Tanahashi

16 - Shinsuke Nakamura

15 - Shinya Hashimoto, Kensuke Sasaki

11 - Riki Choshu, Yuji Nagata, Hiroyoshi Tenzan

9 - Tatsumi Fujinami

7 - Manabu Nakanishi, Kazuchika Okada, Genichiro Tenryu

6 - Satoshi Kojima, Tetsuya Naito, Naoya Ogawa, Yoshihiro Takayama

5 - Antonio Inoki, Kazuyuki Fujita

4 - Shiro Koshinaka, Jushin Liger, Bob Sapp, Katsuyori Shibata

3 - Toshiaki Kawada, Hirooki Goto, Togi Makabe, Mitsuharu Misawa, Kenny Omega, Go Shiozaki, Nobuhiko Takada

2 - Jun Akiyama, Giant Bernard, Hiroshi Hase, Kota Ibushi, Kazuyuki Fujita, Don Frye, Chris Jericho, Brock Lesnar, Seiji Sakaguchi, Jay White, Toru Yano

Okada, Naito, White and Ibushi will add two more this week while Jericho and Tanahashi will add one. Chono and Hashimoto headlined by Weekly Pro Wrestling show which isn't counted, nor top three spots on All Japan or NOAH Dome shows.

The one thing this list shows is that in the first decade plus, they passed around the top spot because they had so many different headliners. Also, they ran many Dome events, not just on 1/4. The biggest money Dome program was the Takada run in 1995-96 with three advanced sellouts against Muto twice and Hashimoto once.

Obviously the greatest in-ring program is Okada vs. Tanahashi, under any measures, with three main events, and three of the best matches ever in the Dome. There were other classic Dome matches from other companies in the 90s and 00s that would easily break top ten, like Aja Kong vs. Manami Toyota in 1994, the All Japan six-man tag at the Weekly Pro Wrestling show in 1995 and Kenta Kobashi vs. Jun Akiyama in 2004.

Still, if there is a debate about best match ever at the Dome, my gut says Omega vs. Okada is the clear-winner, and the closest arguments for another match would be Omega vs. Tanahashi, Kong vs. Toyota or Nakamura vs. Ibushi. The biggest match ever was the first Muto vs. Takada and a darkhorse match combining the two on a New Japan show would be the first Sasaki vs. Kawada match on October 9, 2000, which really felt like your classic major league top guy of two major companies representing their company going against each other with no belt at stake, and only history, the elusive Baba vs. Inoki or Fujinami vs. Tsuruta or Misawa vs. Muto match we never saw. Today you couldn't even have that because none of the No. 2 promotions are at the level where you argue they are really better than New Japan, like was the case with All Japan in the 70s and 80 and NOAH until they lost NTV in the 90s through the late 00s.

When New Japan started running, the building was sometimes called the Egg Dome, because it was shaped like an egg. Technically that term was incorrect and Japanese would be furious when Americans would use the term. It was the Tokyo Dome, nicknamed The Big Egg, but it was not the Egg Dome.

We're going to go back and look at every New Japan Tokyo Dome show since 1992 with our coverage of the show and notes about the shows.

We'll start with the first Tokyo Dome show ever held on 1/4, the start of a tradition that has had many ups and downs over the past 27 years.

JANUARY 4, 1992

The biggest card of the past week was the Saturday afternoon second WCW/New Japan show at the Tokyo Egg Dome. The combined show, which will air as an edited pay-per-view in mid-March in the United States, was said to be nowhere near the level of the initial combined show last March. The show drew a turnaway crowd of 50,000 fans. A few thousand seats that were used at the March show were blocked off for a rampway for the wrestlers to enter, a stage, and another stage for an intermission rock & roll show. While people were turned away at the door, the number turned away was said to be very few, not nearly as many as the previous year. The number of freebies was also said to be extremely few. They also announced a return combined

joint show at the Tokyo Dome for January 4, 1993--exactly one year to the day.

1. Black Cat pinned Hiroyoshi Yamamoto in 10:28 with a DDT.

Current notes: Black Cat, real name Victor Mar, was a journey office worker and all-around tough guy who was one of Chris Benoit friends. Hiroyoshi Yamamoto, a rookie at the time, is now known as Hiroyoshi Tenzan.

2. Osamu Kido & Kuniaki Kobayashi beat Kengo Kimura & Kantaro Hoshino in 11:54 when Kido pinned Hoshino with a small package.

3. Jushin Liger & Masashi Aoyagi & AKIRA (Akira Nogami doing a Kabuki ninja gimmick) beat Super Strong Machine & Hiro Saito & Norio Honaga in 15:12 when AKIRA pinned Saito with a dragon suplex. This was the second best match on the card with lots of high spots, but nothing super.

4. Arn Anderson & Larry Zbyszko beat Michiyoshi Ohara & Shiro Koshinaka in 12:32 when Anderson pinned Ohara (who is something of a young Animal Hamaguchi clone) with a spinebuster. Good match.

5. Dusty & Dustin Rhodes beat Kim Duk & Masa Saito in 14:23 when Dustin pinned Duk with a bulldog headlock. For wrestling work, this was a bad match. Since this match with no doubt be featured in the U.S., Saito decided to work U.S. Japanese heel style (bowing, cheap shots, etc.) which will put the Rhodes family over strong as babyfaces. Dusty did all his gimmick funny walking which got a good reaction but the only crowd reaction was to the comedy portions.

6. Tony Halme (no longer doing the boxing gimmick) pinned Scott Norton in 8:41 with a clothesline off the top rope. Norton got a super reaction as he's just about the most over foreigner in the country now. The work was stiff, but clumsy. It was really bad for working because Halme is awful and Norton, while he's improved to where he can look great with Muto and Hase, obviously is nowhere near ready to carry Halme. The result also shows that Halme is going to get a super push as a new monster heel in 1992. The fans booed Halme a lot at the finish. Partially because the bout was bad, partially because Norton is so popular, partially because the "undeserving" guy won and mainly because Halme stinks and they resent the push.

7. Shinya Hashimoto pinned Bill Kazmaier in 8:37 with a running DDT. Kazmaier did as well as he could, which is still pretty bad. Also stiff and clumsy work and Kazmaier can't sell at all.

8. The final match of the "Murderers Row" (four bad matches in a row that nearly murdered the card) saw Big Van Vader go to a double count out with El Gigante in 4:49. This was said to have been the worst match on the card, which covers some ground. Gigante didn't want to do anything, sold nothing, they didn't have a finish, and you know they didn't exactly work fluidly back and forth. I should make a correction here in regards to last week's issue where we mentioned Vader as winning the IWGP world title in Germany from Tatsumi Fujinami. Apparently at the last minute they changed that match from being for the IWGP world title to being a match to decide the newly-created Catch Wrestling Association Intercontinental champion. So Fujinami went into this show still as IWGP champ, although he had done the job

in Germany, and Vader wasn't defending a title here.

9. Senator Antonio Inoki made Hiroshi Hase submit in 10:09 with the octopus submission after four or five enzuigiri kicks. I was told this will only look okay on television, but live it was a spectacle because it had incredible heat with the crowd going crazy for Inoki like never before. Hase did everything to make the match, so it was good since Hase may be the best worker in the business today. It was good enough that Muto, watching the match, was very worried how his match would be able to follow.

10. Sting & Great Muta (Keiji Muto doing his U.S. heel gimmick) beat Rick & Scott Steiner in 11:03 in the match that made the show. This was said to be ****1/2 stars with all four guys doing one great move after another back-and-forth. Mostly Muta put over the Steiners taking one suplex after another since they were doing the job. This was said to be a better match than last year's Steiners vs. Hase & Sasaki because the fans had no idea who was going to do the job (most figured, correctly so, that Sasaki would in last year's match). The finish saw Rick Steiner catch Muta in a cradle at the same time Sting had Scott in a roll-up and the ref counted to three and ruled Sting and Scott were the legal men in the ring.

11. Lex Luger retained the WCW title pinning Masa Chono in 15:09. This match was said to be a good match judged by the caliber of American standards but a bad match by Japanese standards. Chono did a good job of trying to make Luger look good, although the majority viewpoint after the show was that Luger wasn't much of a worker. Since this was Luger's Japanese debut after so many years of magazine publicity from the U.S., there was tremendous anticipation to this match. After some near falls and failed attempts by Luger to do the torture rack, he got Chono in the rack outside the ring and dropped him on the floor. They teased the count out but Chono got in at 19. After two more near falls, Chono went for a back suplex but Luger kicked him low. Luger then came off the ropes with a double ax handle for the pin. The fans booed at the end because they hated the gimmick (low blow) finish.

12. Riki Choshu pinned Tatsumi Fujinami in 12:11 after three Riki-lariatos to unify the Greatest 18 Club World Martial Arts title and the IWGP title. The match was better than average, but couldn't hold a candle to their legendary matches of the past and they did nothing new with each other they haven't done a million times before. People just expected a lot more in regards to both story and substance from a Tokyo Dome main event.

NOTES: No word on the gate, but it should be well in excess of \$3 million

After the Choshu vs. Fujinami match, Inoki came out and gave a speech to a super reaction. Choshu was in the ring with him but Fujinami walked out of the ring and wasn't happy (there is tremendous legit animosity between Inoki and Fujinami right now since Choshu, Inoki, Masa Saito and Hase have all the political power that Fujinami thought he had earned by his years of being Inoki's understudy and apparent heir). When all the wrestlers came to the ring as Inoki led the crowd in his Ichi-Ni-San-Da chant, Fujinami practically had to be dragged back in. So once again, Inoki stole the "impact" from Choshu's winning the world title

The last several matches of the card aired live on television, although TV time ran out in the

middle of the main event

In the dressing room, Choshu said that by combining the Greatest 18 Club title and the IWGP title that the combination makes him the most important singles champion in the world. He then did a Jerry Lawler type interview challenging wrestlers from other promotions and said that this title should be a real world title, bigger than the promotion. He gave an example of wrestling a match against Tenryu, and if he lost to Tenryu, then the SWS would get possession of the title and have the real world champion and that he, or Hase, or Muto or someone else would have to go to SWS and try and win the title back

There is a huge story behind the scenes going on which is why he did this interview. Apparently Sagawa Express (equivalent to Federal Express in the United States) has been backing Inoki as he runs around the globe doing nothing playing the politician angle for the Japanese public. However since the company has lost money, they had to cut back on outside endeavors including backing Inoki's political adventures. So Inoki needed a political sponsor and went to Hachiro Tanaka, the so-called "super-rich mark" who owns Megame Super Opticals and also owns SWS and PWF. The two apparently made a deal that would include a joint card later this year (none of this is confirmed yet but as the story goes, they have a Dome date booked secretly) with a gimmick of SWS vs. New Japan headlined by Choshu vs. Tenryu

Inoki is expected to wrestle and be involved with wrestling in 1992 on a more frequent basis than in the past few years.

Current note: The Choshu vs. Tenryu match talked about ended up not taking place until one year later in this same building in the main event of a show that had tremendous interest because of it.

JANUARY 4, 1993

The annual New Japan Tokyo Egg Dome show has, which had its fifth version on Monday, 1/4, has in that time turned into from a prestige factor, right behind Wrestlemania as the biggest card of the year in the world. This year's show did nothing to hurt that reputation as the seventh largest recorded crowd to ever witness pro wrestling—53,500--sold the building out one week in advance to see a show that received raves from everyone I spoke with about it. The number of people in the building was slightly smaller than two other sellouts of the Dome because some seats were blocked off because they had a stage for a band that played before the show and during intermission.

In comparison with the previous card I saw at the Dome (3/21/91 Flair vs. Fujinami), even though that show drew the largest sports crowd ever in Japan, it didn't sellout until just before show time (as compared with this show selling out one week ahead) and there were scattered empty seats (although maybe 150 at most) at that show whereas at this show, it appeared every seat was filled.

I've received no official gate count, although from the pricing structure (\$246 down to \$25), it was probably in excess of \$3.5 million and may have been the largest live gate in pro wrestling history. If it wasn't, it certainly wasn't far off the mark. The ten match, four-and-a-half ho

spectacular was unique in that many different styles of wrestling were presented so no match was similar in form to any other match, making the long length of the show not detract at all. On the downside, the Tokyo Dome is a terrible place to watch wrestling. Most of the seats are so far away that the majority of fans are following the action by watching the big screen rather than the ring. Being so far away from the action takes away from the heat so the building was very quiet much of the time. In addition, sound doesn't carry well, again, because of the size of the building, which makes the stiffness, sound of the bumps and sound of guard rails shots pretty much silent to much of the live audience.

1. Takayuki Iizuka & Akira Nogami & El Samurai (Osamu Matsuda) of New Japan defeated Nobukazu Hirai & Masao Orihara & Koki Kitahara (Tatsumi Kitahara) of WAR in 15:11. The New Japan trio came out waving the New Japan flag. This was a typical Japanese style fast-paced opener. The crowd was quiet even though it was an interpromotional match but the work was good. First hot move was Orihara doing a moonsault bodyblock off the apron onto the floor on Samurai. Kitahara was booed like crazy when he tagged in. The finish of the match saw Iizuka give Orihara a power bomb but the pin was broken up. Orihara acted like he was knocked out and just laid there limp while Iizuka was trying to pick him up for the next spot. Everyone started brawling all over with the WAR guys trying to occupy all the New Japan guys to give Orihara time to recover. After about a minute of this, Nogami covered Orihara for the pin. It didn't look like this was the planned finish and that Orihara was injured, so the finish didn't come off great. Perhaps it was the planned finish just to pull a surprise. ***1/4

2. The Skinheads (Shiro Koshinaka & Masashi Aoyagi & Great Kabuki [Akihisa Mera] & Akitoshi Saito) beat The Raging Staff (Super Strong Machine [Junji Hirata] & Hiro Saito & Norio Honaga & Tatsutoshi Goto) in a grudge match of the heel quartets in 14:20. Kuniaki Kobayashi, who has been out of action for several months after an operation to remove three polyps from his intestine, and Kengo Kimura, who is also injured, were both at ringside in the Skinheads corner. Really good work throughout with a lot of nearly out of control brawling. The finish saw H.Saito backdrop Aoyagi and Honaga caught him on the way down and turned it into a power bomb. Machine came off the top rope with a diving head-butt on Aoyagi but Aoyagi was saved from the pin. H.Saito tagged in and delivered a backward splash (senton in Lucha Libre moves) but Koshinaka managed to hot tag in doing the butt bump on both Machine and Honaga. Honaga held Koshinaka and Goto went to clothesline him but Koshinaka ducked and Honaga took the blow. Machine had already come off the top rope by this point and accidentally head-butted Honaga. Kabuki tagged in and clotheslined Honaga and pinned him after a back suplex. ***1/2

3. Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) pinned Ultimo Dragon (Yoshihiro Asai) in 20:09 to win the IWGP World junior heavyweight title. Although this was a very good match with several hot moves, it fell short of expectations since fans in Japan had waited three years for this dream match. Liger's ring entrance with explosives being set off in the background, wearing a new blue ring costume got a super reaction. Dragon came out in a Mil Mascaras-like costume to a surprisingly light reaction. Dragon has gone downhill over the past two years because of all his ankle problems from the many dives out of the ring. The first part of the match was very slow

with Dragon working on Liger's left leg. At 8:00 in, they picked up the pace using several of their patented hot moves in a Lucha style. First big dive saw Dragon come off the top rope and leap over the guard railing onto Liger and both took the bump crashing over the press table. When they got in the ring, Dragon went for a tombstone piledriver, but Liger shifted his weight to reverse the move, but Dragon reversed the reverse and instead of tombstoning Liger, dropped him into a power bomb. Dragon then came off the top rope for a diving head-butt, but he either slipped or screwed up because he landed on his feet several feet short and everyone in the building knew he blew the move and the collective groans from 53,500 fans was ominous. From this point, they went to all the big moves and near falls. Dragon wasn't very good but Liger was his usual excellent big match self. Liger did a power bomb on the floor and then came off the top rope to the floor with a somersault into a diving head-butt. In the ring Liger did a Frankensteiner and German suplex for near falls but when he came off the rope again, Dragon met him with a clothesline. Liger was knocked from the ring and Dragon came off the middle rope backwards with a twisting somersault splash instead of his regular moonsault and both crashed into the guard rail. Dragon came off with a moonsault bodyblock off the middle rope for a near fall and a Dandina cradle for another near fall. Liger did a DDT off the top rope for a near fall, a Liger bomb for near fall and finally got the pin with a Frankensteiner off the top rope.

***3/4

Current notes: At this point in time, this was a dream match. Liger was New Japan's top junior heavyweight star. Dragon was WAR's top junior heavyweight star. In the 1992 coverage, we noted SWS and New Japan would be working together due to Inoki's deal with Hachiro Tanaka. SWS by this point had folded and WAR was formed by Genichiro Tenryu, and that deal allowed this match to take place. It was by far the biggest match of Dragon's career, and arguably of Liger's, but Dragon had a bad night.

4. Ron Simmons pinned Tony Halme in 6:10. Before the match they announced that Vader had beaten Simmons in Baltimore to win the title which got little reaction. The WCW belt means less than one-tenth what the NWA belt used to mean in Japan. The whole building emptied out for the concession stands and bathroom after Liger's match so there was no reaction to anything here. Simmons at least entered to his old entrance music although no reaction. It was a good power match with stiff moves going back-and-forth although easily the worst match on the show. They did a few near falls, including Simmons side stepping a tackle by Halme into an inside cradle which should have been the finish but they got tangled in the ropes. Simmons then used the sidewalk slam for the pin which is hardly a finishing move in Japan. The result was something of an upset. *1/2

5. Sting pinned Hiroshi Hase in 15:31. People rushed back from the concession stands for this match. Sting got a huge pop, although not quite as big as Liger's. It's obvious Sting is the one WCW wrestler they see as a superstar. Hase has tremendous charisma to go along with his ability and his reaction equaled Sting's. Sting pressed Hase overhead for six reps early in the match. When Hase got the advantage, he did Rick Rude's his gyrating dance. It slowed a little bit during the middle portion. Hase picked things up doing a Russian leg sweep, throat drop, double kneedrop off the top rope and a sleeper for near wins. He also used two Soviet judo

suplexes and a German suplex for near falls. Sting came back and quickly leaped off the top rope for a cross bodyblock but Hase met him with a move and Sting started selling his ribs. It looked like the move screwed up although it happened so fast, I'm not really sure what happened. Hase chopped Sting like crazy to the chest until Sting made a superman comeback and stopped selling the chops. Sting did two face-busters and put Hase on his shoulders for a backbreaker. Hase kicked off the ropes, flipped over for a near fall but Sting did the bridge coming up and turned it into a backslide but Hase reversed it into a near fall of his own. Sting did a Kyoko Inoue-like backwards bodyblock off the top rope and a German suplex for near falls. Hase did a rolling reverse cradle for a near fall. Hase went for another Soviet suplex, Sting blocked the move and turned it into a flying DDT. Sting then came off the top rope with a Snuka style splash for the pin. ***1/2

6. Masa Saito & Shinya Hashimoto beat Dustin Rhodes & Scott Norton in 13:57. Saito was a sub for Antonio Inoki who suffered a toe infection and the line-up switch was announced more than a week before the card so everyone knew about it. Norton and Hashimoto opened chopping each other hard and stiff but also screwed up an early spot. Rhodes did some Dusty Rhodes spots early before missing a tackle and taking a bump on the ramp. Crowd popped big when Saito tagged in and used the Saito suplex on both men. Norton at one point used a superplex on Hashimoto. Mainly Rhodes sold and this resembled an American style tag match. Rhodes took a spin bump off Hashimoto's clothesline. Hashimoto then did a running DDT on Rhodes but Norton made the save. Hashimoto then pinned Rhodes after an enzuigiri. **3/4

At this point it was like a complete show was already over since it started at 3 p.m. and it was 5:20 p.m. They had two mini-blimps flying around stratosphere of the Dome during intermission while a horn band played several classic songs. Their final number was Inoki's theme. Seriously. The intermission lasted 30 minutes. The ring announcer then announced a show on May 3 for the 68,000 seat new Fukuoka Dome and tickets would go on sale on 2/11. He then announced a January 4, 1994 date at the Tokyo Dome.

7. Great Muta pinned Masa Chono in 19:48 to unify both the NWA and IWGP versions of the World heavyweight title. Because these belts are now unified, don't expect the title to ever be unified with the WCW title. Also, expect the NWA title to be Japanese property from this point forward, which has probably been Inoki's goal for the past 20 years. Chono came out to by far the best reaction thus far in the show. They had an explosion and confetti dropped on him. Muta made a super ring entrance as well. Early in the match Muta went under the ring to find an object a few times and finally found a hammer. Ref Masao Hattori took it away and from that point he wrestled as Muto instead of Muta which made it a great match. Chono started working the knee early. The first big move was Muta giving Chono a face-buster on the ramp. Muta then started walking back to the dressing room and nobody knew what he was doing. Then all of a sudden, from 45 yards out, he broke into a full sprint back to the ring and hit Chono with a running clothesline. Muta then used a superplex, back suplex and German suplex for near falls. After Muta used the handspring elbow into the corner, he went up for the moonsault but Chono moved. Chono immediately clamped on the STF but Muta hit the rope. The two then traded Yakuza kicks (high kicks to the face) by Chono and dropkicks by Muta back-and-forth four

times (teasing the finish of their 8/11 match). Chono did two more kicks but had a third blocked and was suplexed onto the ramp. Muta tried the handspring elbow on the ramp but Chono moved out of the way so Muta landed on his head on the ramp. Chono then back suplexed him on the ramp. Muta came back with a running dive over the top rope into a flying forearm. Chono then sidestepped Muta and took him down in a schoolboy for a near fall, then came off the top rope with a shoulderblock for another near fall. Chono used a power bomb (finish of their August 1991 match) for a near fall, a Samoan drop and caught him in the STF in the middle in what looked to be the finish. Muta got to the ropes and hit a Frankensteiner out of nowhere for another near fall. Muta went for another moonsault but Chono got his knees up. Chono went up for a shoulderblock but Muta moved. Muta hit a moonsault but Chono kicked out, however Muta went up and hit another moonsault and this time Chono didn't kick out.

***1/4

Current notes: As it turned out, New Japan didn't get control of the NWA title, which led to the IWGP title and NWA splitting up. The NWA title reverted back to WCW, and after all, was eventually called the WCW International world title when the actual NWA members and WCW had a falling out. That title and the WCW world title were united in 1994 when Ric Flair, the WCW International champion, beat Sting, the WCW champion, on June 23, 1994, in Biloxi, MS,. The WCW International title was never talked about again. The NWA title became an independent title which decades later would be defended again at the Tokyo Dome. The unification was done so Flair could have the title unified to lose to Hulk Hogan on July 7, 1994, in Orlando.

8. The Hell Raisers (Hawk Warrior [Michael Hegstrand] & Power Warrior [Kensuke Sasaki]) retained the IWGP World tag team titles going to a double count out with Rick & Scott Steiner in 14:38. This match was every bit as good as the Steiners classic in 1991 against Hase & Sasaki at the Tokyo Dome which was that year's Match of the year, and would have been a candidate for the same award this year, except for the finish, which nearly ruined everything. Steiners were over huge. Hell Raisers entered to a light show. Sasaki looks a lot better with the gimmick and really they make a better tag team than the Road Warriors because Sasaki is a much better worker and far more versatile than Animal was. Scott and Hawk started with Scott dominating using amateur moves and tossing him around the mat at will. Hawk came back and dropped Scott over the top rope onto the floor. Scott got back in, regained the advantage, and used the double arm suplex into a power bomb on Hawk for a near fall. Scott used a piledriver but Hawk didn't sell it and got back up and hit Scott with a clothesline, knocking Scott over the top rope. Rick and Power then tagged in. After Rick suplexed him out of his boots, he came off the top rope but Power met him with a dropkick. Power went to the top but Rick climbed up and gave him a belly-to-belly superplex. Hawk and Scott came back in and Scott used a belly-to-belly superplex on Hawk and caught him in the STF but Hawk managed to crawl to the ropes. Hawk came back with an enzuigiri and shoulder breaker. Scott tagged Rick and Hawk tagged Power. Power did a perfect Buzz Sawyer powerslam on Rick but Rick came with a single leg into a belly-to-belly. Scott did a belly-to-belly superplex on Power and a bulldog off the top rope while Power was on Rick's shoulder but Hawk made the save. Rick put Power on his shoulders again

and Scott came off with a clothesline. Power Hawk ducked a double clothesline by the Steiners and knocked both down with clotheslines. Scott then knocked Hawk out of the ring and gave Power a Frankensteiner but Hawk got back in and clotheslined Scott out of the ring before he could do the cover. Rick German suplexed Power for a near fall but Power came back with the reverse ipponzei on Rick. Hawk came off the apron with a clothesline on Scott and both went over the guard rail. Power dropkicked Rick. It wound up with Scott and Hawk ruled as legal men and both being counted out. Fans booed the ending like crazy and even though it was a great match, nobody after the match would give them credit for having a good match. Obviously the Steiners wouldn't do the job and I basically understand why for business reasons since they lost two matches in November and didn't want to make it three in a row, I still disagree. They all hugged after the match but the fans were still booing heavily. ****

Current notes: This was a hell of a match but by 1993 the double count out finish was now longer acceptable. I can't tell you exactly why it happened, but when I talked guys after the show, they said it was the only finish possible, so evidently they wanted one team to win, and the other wasn't willing to lose.

9. Tatsumi Fujinami made Takashi Ishikawa submit to the dragon sleeper in 11:41. Everyone was getting up and leaving for the concession stands again when this started. Ishikawa came out and was booed like crazy. Fujinami got a huge pop. Fujinami did the smart thing here because the crowd would have easily lost interest, so he did a dropkick knocking Ishikawa out of the ring and dove through the ropes with a tackle which caused the biggest reaction thus far on the show. In fact, it was one of the loudest reactions by the most fans I've ever heard live. Ishikawa came back with a plancha (vaulting over the top rope with a crossbody to the floor) on Fujinami and in the ring, used Fujinami's own Dragon sleeper which got incredible heat. Fujinami came back and used the Dragon sleeper but Ishikawa broke it with kicks to the face. They traded near falls toward the end with Fujinami winning with two enzuigiris and a Dragon sleeper for the submission. The place went nuts for the finish. ***1/2

10. Genichiro Tenryu pinned Riki Choshu in 18:14. Choshu was the total babyface here. Antonio Inoki was doing color at ringside. First 5:00 were slow which was probably smart coming off all the heat in the previous match. Then they turned it up. Tenryu juiced, which was the only juice on the show. Good heat. Tenryu got near falls with a DDT (talk about an overused move on this show) and an elbow off the top rope. Choshu used his signature Saito suplex for a near fall and at one point delivered four consecutive lariats but still couldn't get the pin. Choshu went for a fifth lariat and Tenryu caught him with a high kick. This turned into a brawl with less outstanding moves than most of the previous matches but stiff action. It was the most exciting match on the show because the tension was so thick in the air by the end. Tenryu used a superplex and an elbow off the top rope to the back of Choshu's head for near falls. Tenryu went for a tackle but Choshu caught him in a small package but they went into the ropes. Choshu did a German suplex for a near fall. Tenryu did an enzuigiri and went for a power bomb but Choshu tried to block it and they stayed in that position for more than a minute before Tenryu finally got him up and dropped him but Choshu kicked out of the pin. After a second power bomb, Tenryu got the surprise pin. After the match Antonio Inoki got into the ring and did an

interview saying that he needed two months to get back in shape and he'd give Tenryu his promised match on 5/3 at the Fukuoka Dome. ****

JANUARY 4, 1994

The sixth annual New Japan spectacular at the Tokyo Dome on 1/4, billed as "Battlefield '94," hardly qualified under the word spectacular.

What was easily the weakest line-up for a New Japan Dome show ever resulted in a marathon lackluster show, which began at 3 p.m. and ended at 9 p.m.

Most of the talk both before after the show centered around the Antonio Inoki vs. Genichiro Tenryu match, which matched up two of the veteran all-time legends in Japan for the first time. The question of who was going to go down gained a lot of interest, since one would think Tenryu should win for the good of the promotion since he's going to be used as a headliner on big shows for the rest of the year, while Inoki is the all-time superstar and theoretically wouldn't want to put Tenryu over.

Well, the good of the promotion won out this time, however an ominous note was the failure of the show to sellout, the first time this has been the case for a New Japan Dome show since the first one in 1989. The crowd was announced at 62,000, although from our reports that is a slightly inflated figure as the outfield section was empty, although there were more than 40,000 there. From virtually all reports, the highlights of the show were the Inoki-Tenryu and Steiners vs. Hase & Muto matches. Results were:

1. Michiyoshi Ohara & Kuniaki Kobayashi & Great Kabuki & Shiro Koshinaka & Kengo Kimura beat Manabu Nakanishi & Yuji Nagata & Satoshi Kojima & El Samurai & Osamu Kido in 12:09 when Ohara pinned Nagata in a decent opener.

CURRENT NOTE: This show started Nagata's streak of being on every 1/4 show for the next 25 years.

2. Takayuki Iizuka & Akira Nogami beat Masashi Aoyagi & Akitoshi Saito in 14:07 when Nogami pinned Saito with a German suplex. This was said to be a good match.

3. Brutus Beefcake, managed by Jimmy Hart, pinned Black Cat in 8:06 with a jumping knee to the chin. This match was said to be horrible, far and away the worst match on the show.

4. Super Strong Machine pinned Tatsutoshi Goto in 8:51 after a lariat in a blah match for such a grudge.

5. Jushin Liger pinned Tiger Mask in a non-title match in 14:26 using the shooting star press. After the match, Tiger Mask removed his mask, revealing Koji Kanemoto to the surprise of nobody, and issued a challenge for a rematch. This match was said to have been good, but disappointing because Tiger Mask isn't in the league with Liger.

6. In the only title change of the show, Hawk & Power Warrior regained the IWGP tag titles from the Jurassic Powers (Scott Norton & Hercules) in 12:47. The finish saw the Raisers do the "Double Impact" (the old Road Warriors finish where Power had Hercules on his shoulders and

Hawk came off the top with the clothesline) and then Power pinned Hercules with a reverse ipponzei (a judo throw that is really a super-fast hiplock with the guy coming off the ropes). This was said to have been the second worst match on the show.

7. Rick & Scott Steiner beat Hiroshi Hase & Keiji Muto in 20:51. This was pretty well said to have been either the best or second best match on the show. There was a big crowd pop when Scott debuted his suplex dropped into a piledriver move in Japan on Hase. Hase sold it huge but wasn't pinned by it, and kept trying comebacks but never really came back from it. Finally Rick got Hase on his shoulders and Scott was on the top rope and DDT'd Hase. Then Scott got Hase on his shoulders and Rick came off the top with a bulldog for the pin. After the match the Steiners in the post-match press conference challenged the Hell Raisers for the tag team titles.

8. Hulk Hogan, with Jimmy Hart, pinned Tatsumi Fujinami in 13:33 after an axe bomber (lariat). As usual with Hogan in Japan, he tried to demonstrate his wrestling skill doing drop toe-holds and rides. Fujinami's performance was described as just being there to let Hogan do his thing rather than wrestling up to his own legendary status and trying to work an even, competitive, exciting match, but it was said to be okay.

9. Riki Choshu returned after missing six months after tearing his Achilles tendon and needing surgery, and pinned Yoshiaki Fujiwara with a lariat in 9:04. Disappointing match and Choshu's comeback didn't draw nearly as much heat as expected.

10. Shinya Hashimoto retained the IWGP title pinning Masa Chono in 28:00 after a running DDT. Mainly strong-style matwork, which was good for those who liked UWF-style, but at this late point in the show, the match went way too long, never opened up and bored a lot of people.

11. Tenryu pinned Inoki in 15:56. Apparently the story behind the story was that Inoki wanted to win, but New Japan didn't want it to happen. So they created the angle two weeks before the match where Inoki and Tenryu couldn't agree on whether it would be martial arts (knockout or submission, but no pins) rules or pro wrestling rules. Both refused to sign the contract at that point, but a few days later it was announced it would be under pro wrestling rules. This match had the most heat of the card and they did all their spots fans were familiar with so everything was over. They actually stalled for several minutes early. The key point was Inoki getting Tenryu in the sleeper but Tenryu getting to the ropes. Tenryu sold it big, acting as if he was asleep, but since he was under the ropes, the match couldn't end. All the WAR wrestlers at ringside kept screaming "Wake up, wake up" but Tenryu wouldn't move for 30 seconds. At that point, Choshu slapped him hard in the face and Tenryu woke up, which was a spot so Inoki could look like a winner. Tenryu came back to win the match with a power bomb. After the match they did another spot for Inoki to come out looking good. Tenryu said it was a great match and asked for a rematch on the next big show if Inoki's busy schedule allowed him the time to free for wrestling, but Inoki said he was so busy with things that are far more important than pro wrestling that he didn't think he'd have the time, so it was Inoki's way at the end of when he lost making sure everyone knew that even though he had lost this match, that he had much more important things going on than pro wrestling matches, that he had graduated to more important things and thus losing this wasn't really that big a deal. Still, at the end, they tried to

play this up big that Tenryu was the only wrestler in history ever to pin both Baba and Inoki. Stan Hansen had beaten them both, but Hansen's win over Inoki was via count out.

JANUARY 4, 1995

Lots of news coming out of the Tokyo Dome show. Most reports indicated overall the five-and-a-half hour show was average to a little better than average.

The general consensus was that the Steiners vs. Hiroshi Hase & Keiji Muto match was in the ***3/4 to ****1/2 range. That match at the Shinya Hashimoto vs. Kensuke Sasaki title match (***1/4 to ****1/4) the picks as the best match. The Sabu & Masa Chono vs. Tatsumi Fujinami & Junji Hirata match was pretty well ***1/2 across-the-board.

New Japan was thrilled with the return of Hiroyoshi Tenzan in his match with Manabu Nakanishi match to the point they are giving Tenzan a title shot at Hashimoto on 2/4 in Sapporo pushing the idea that at 23, Tenzan is the youngest wrestler in New Japan history ever to challenge for the world heavyweight title.

The BVD martial arts tournament was said to have been horrible, even worse than the Hawk-Scott Norton match. The worst match on the show was Sting vs. Tony Palmore which was said to have been embarrassing although not due to Sting at all. Palmore, billed as a protégé of karate star Eddie "Monster Man" Everett from the 70s, was actually a Bart Vail (former UWF and PWFG wrestler who actually had a story written about him in *Sports Illustrated* which said his UWF and PWFG matches in Japan were real) student from Florida.

Palmore's punches were so pulled it was horrible and he was described as worse than Leon Spinks. Antonio Inoki vs. Gerard Gordeau was better, but still bad, described as looking like a worked version of a UFC match. Inoki vs. Sting was said to have been terrible with Inoki not doing a thing (selling the leg from the Gordeau match) and Sting controlling the entire match until Inoki got the sleeper out of nowhere.

As for the other matches, Shinjiro Otani's UWA title defense against El Samurai was said to have been very good with hot moves but Otani did show weakness in transitions. Norio Honaga's IWGP junior title defense against Great Sasuke was good but not of the quality of most Sasuke matches.

Originally Sasuke was going to win the title in this match, but New Japan changed plans when Sasuke dropped the Independent junior title to Ricky Fuji on the FMW show on 12/20 in Nagoya. New Japan felt that by doing a job for a wrestler the quality of Fuji on an FMW show, that they couldn't put him over for their world title.

The rest of the show was by-and-large considered fair to average. Overall the promotion was thrilled with drawing a sellout 52,500 on a rainy day with a line-up that hardly seemed on paper strong enough to garner a crowd that large. This is more a testament to just how strong the tradition aspect of the January Tokyo Dome show has become.

The only gate figure we received was \$6.8 million which was an all-time record, although that number includes both merchandising at the show and television network broadcast rights.

not eventual video sales) so the actual live ticket gate was probably about \$4.8 million.

New Japan did claim it as an all-time world record for pro wrestling, which it is. Outside of Japan, the largest gate for pro wrestling was the \$3.45 million set in the Hulk Hogan vs. Ultimate Warrior match in Toronto Sky Dome but that's been topped now probably by four Dome shows.

Jushin Liger and Akira Hokuto did the color commentary for the Dome television shows. Hokuto being put in that spot shows just how over and well respected she's become in the last few years and how well accepted women's wrestling has become as well because a few years ago they never would have dreamed of putting a woman wrestler in that spot.

Current note: This was the only year, from 1989 to 2017, that Liger didn't wrestle on the big Tokyo Dome show of the year. This year will make the second time.

Eric Bischoff was at the show and made an announcement in the ring that WCW and New Japan were going to do more talent exchanges in 1995. The two sides signed a new deal which will probably include more WCW talent on the big shows in 1995 and possibly Steiners and Road Warriors along with Hase, Muto, Liger, Scott Norton and Chris Benoit working on WCW PPV shows in 1995 as well.

Let's just say that he didn't leave people with much respect for the state of the American wrestling business. Actually the comment was along the lines of "our marks know more about wrestling than this guy."

1. Shinjiro Otani retained the UWA junior heavyweight title pinning El Samurai with a dragon suplex (full nelson into German suplex) in 15:17.
2. Norio Honaga retained the IWGP junior heavyweight title pinning Great Sasuke in 14:39 with la magistral (Dandy or Heavy Metal cradle).
3. Akitoshi Saito & Kuniaki Kobayashi & Great Kabuki over Akira Nogami & Takayuki Iizuka & Osamu Kido in 13:12 when Kabuki pinned Nogami with a clothesline.
4. Koji Kanemoto returned from the United States and pinned Yuji Nagata in 14:43 with a senton (back splash) off the top rope.
5. Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Hiroyoshi Yamamoto) returned after a lengthy stay in Europe and pinned Manabu Nakanishi with his finishing maneuver called a mountain bomb (airplane spin dropped into a power bomb) in 7:40.
6. Tiger Jeet Singh Sr. & Jr. defeated Shiro Koshinaka & Michiyoshi Ohara in 11:23 when Singh Sr. used the cobra claw on Ohara.
7. In the first round of the BVD martial arts tournament, Sting made American kick boxer Tony Palmore submit to the scorpion in 4:29.
8. In the other tournament semifinal, Antonio Inoki defeated Gerard Gordeau (UFC I finalist), the famous karate/savate master from Holland with a choke sleeper in 6:37.

Current note: Both the Inoki and the Sting matches were horrible. This wasn't Sting's fault at all, because Palmore was hopeless. That said, the Inoki vs. Sting final match was terrible as well.

9. Riki Choshu & Yoshiaki Yatsu over Kengo Kimura & Tatsutoshi Goto in 12:32 when Choshu pinned Kimura after a lariat.

Current note: Choshu & Yatsu, who both wrestled in the Olympics, Choshu in 1972 and Yatsu in 1976, were a fantastic tag team a decade earlier and this was nostalgia from their All Japan run where they feuded with Jumbo Tsuruta & Genichiro Tenryu in classic matches.

10. Sabu & Masa Chono over Junji Hirata & Tatsumi Fujinami in 11:18. Sabu hit Hirata with a chair and Chono scored the pin after a Yakuza kick.

11. Road Warrior Hawk, with Animal in his corner, pinned Scott Norton in 7:41 when Animal tripped up Norton from the outside and Hawk came off the top rope with a clothesline to the back for the pin.

12. In the BVD final, Inoki defeated Sting with a choke sleeper after getting behind him when Sting picked him up for a suplex in 10:26.

13. Hiroshi Hase & Keiji Muto retained the IWGP tag team titles beating Rick & Scott Steiner in 25:12 when Hase pinned Rick after a Northern Lights suplex; 14. Shinya Hashimoto retained the IWGP heavyweight title pinning Kensuke Sasaki in 19:36 with a fisherman's buster (fisherman suplex dropped straight down).

We'll have more details next week. It was very rainy which some thought might hurt the walk-up since it didn't sellout in advance as previous Dome shows have. As a Dome show this was considered ordinary or even less than that as far as line-up was concerned with the crowd being drawn largely because it is the traditional biggest show of the year in Japan and not because of any specific match-up. There were no huge surprises other than fans probably expected several title changes, probably in all three IWGP title matches, and there weren't any. Hashimoto-Sasaki was also considered good but no matches were talked of as being matches of the year. There were no unique suicidal moves by either Sabu or Great Sasuke. Of course Antonio Inoki got the biggest reaction followed by Hashimoto and Sasaki. Sting carried the Inoki match the entire way with Inoki selling a bad leg coming down the aisle at the beginning from all the kicks by Gordeau in his first round match. Sting worked on the leg most of the match using the scorpion and even the STF. There were a lot of hints throughout the show that this would be Inoki's final match in Japan although it was never outright said. Sasuke was slowed by a broken wrist (for all his heart, this guy if he doesn't tone down is going to have his body fall completely apart by the end of this year) suffered in mid-December but still did two Asai-moonsaults into the aisle as the highlight of his match. Hiroyoshi Tenzan surprised a lot of people showing up weighing in the 280 range (he was junior heavyweight size when he left) and got a nice reaction when he did a moonsault at that weight.

APRIL 2, 1995

Notes: This was not a New Japan show, but was one of the most unique pro wrestling events in

history. *Weekly Pro Wrestling* a full-color magazine that was the leading pro wrestling publication in the world of its time, organized a wrestling show and invited every promotion in the country to send in one match. Because the magazine wielded so much power in the industry, virtually every major promotion and several minor ones invited did with the exception of WAR, which did a rival show at the same time with *Weekly Gong*, a rival magazine, and at first, All Japan. But All Japan got a great offer, Giant Baba sent in his top stars for a six-man tag, and they ended up stealing the show. New Japan got the main event slot as the biggest promotion, and put two of its big three stars, Shinya Hashimoto and Masahiro Chono, in the main event. But they couldn't follow the crowd, which in particular went crazy for Mitsuharu Misawa, by far the most popular wrestler on the show and thus, in the country, and his rival, Stan Hansen. In hindsight, the other most notable thing on the show is that as successful as it was, one would have thought it would have been done again as maybe an annual Super Bowl like event for Japanese wrestling. But it never happened. It turned out to be a once-in-a-generation event, never duplicated again.

Weekly Pro Wrestling, a 300,000-circulation Japanese magazine had put together a show with probably the single greatest collection of wrestling stars ever to appear on the same stage. Thirteen different companies from Japan sent, in most cases, main event quality matches for a show that featured as much true competition as pro wrestling can ever have. The wrestlers from every company were in competition with one another to see who could put on the best show with a sellout crowd of 50,000 fans watching who would all use this as an opportunity to compare all the big stars from each organization and the groups with one another.

In the case of all but a few performers on the show, the Tokyo Dome show would be the largest crowd they had ever performed before and it was the all-time record gate for a pro wrestling event, estimated at somewhere between \$5 and \$6 million. There were reports of scalpers getting \$1,200 to \$1,400 for tickets although I didn't see any evidence of that. The crowd was drawn with virtually no media hype except that provided by the magazine that promoted the show and its own weekly wrestling television and radio talk shows hosted by editor Tarzan Yamamoto, whose name may become one of the most important in pro wrestling worldwide over the next year based on the success of this event.

There was an interesting difference between this show and *Wrestlemania*. In the United States, the vast majority of the hype for a big show comes from the company's television show. In Japan, while television is a promotional force with for All Japan and New Japan and the two main womens groups, it is probably far more important to have mainstream and wrestling media coverage. Many groups like FMW, UWFI and the old UWF have drawn some incredible monster houses without even having a regular television show. Matches of the past 12 months such as Atsushi Onita vs. Genichiro Tenryu, which drew 52,000 fans on May 5, 1994, were drawn because the newspapers, magazines and news show hyped the crowd into believing that this meeting between two famous celebrities was a big deal and thus it became one.

Wrestlemania was a success not because of any wrestlers, but because of Lawrence Taylor and hype he gave the show, with the idea that the rub from Taylor and media spotlight would enable

some of the current WWF wrestlers, Diesel, Michaels and Bigelow in particular, to become as famous as Hulk Hogan, Roddy Piper and Randy Savage had become nearly a decade earlier. WWF was clearly aiming this show primarily to an audience that normally doesn't follow or have any knowledge of pro wrestling, figuring that the wrestling fans who buy every PPV are obviously going to buy this one since it's Wrestlemania.

The Tokyo Dome show sellout, while expected because of the unbelievable depth of the line-up and the idea of 13 promotions all sending their top stars to one show, was even more bizarre when it came to media coverage. The media has so much more power over pro wrestling in Japan that no major company wanted to offend the largest circulation weekly by turning down their invitation to be a part of the show. All the smaller groups jumped at the chance to get their wrestlers to perform before such a huge crowd. When the smaller groups announced their matches first, with several going all out with their hottest in ring matches in attempts to get over in front of the big crowd, the bigger promotions were left with having to save face at the show by not being shown up. So they announced much more attractive matches than even those at Weekly Pro when this idea was hatched figured they'd be able to get. The exception was WAR, which has always had shaky relations with Weekly Pro dating back to its previous form as SWS when it, after negative articles, banned Weekly Pro from its shows and Weekly Pro countered by almost totally ignoring the existence of SWS. This brought *Weekly Gong*, a Pro Wrestling Illustrated-type weekly (as opposed to Weekly Pro which as far as the manner of coverage attempts to be Observer like but falls short because of the nature of Japanese culture to avoid confrontational situations), which is Weekly Pro's main competition, into heavily pushing SWS and maintaining a strong relationship with Genichiro Tenryu's new company. WAR had already had a show booked on 4/2 at Korakuen Hall, a stone's throw away from the Tokyo Dome, and Gong got involved as co-promoters. New Japan, trying to play both ends, sent its top singles match to the Dome, but also sent its most famous active wrestler, Riki Choshu, along with several from its satellite Heisei Ishingun office to the Gong show.

The Korakuen Hall show also sold out and with standing room packed a reported 2,200 fans into the 1,850-seat Hall. A closed circuit site, which also sold out, was added to the grounds to handle the overflow. Ironically, it wasn't until 8:45 p.m., minutes after the six hour and 45 minute-long Dome show had ended, but before the WAR main matches had gone into the ring, that the closed-circuit theater showing was packed since right after Shinya Hashimoto pinned Masa Chono to end the Dome show, an estimated 480 fans rushed to the theater to catch two more matches.

The other major players in the Japanese media game are *Tokyo Sports*, a tabloid style daily scandal sheet largely hated by all Americans who are brought in to play baseball since it normally blames the Americans for any problems the teams are having and gives several pages of prominent pro wrestling coverage every day along with sumo, golf and other major sports, *Nikkan Sports*, another daily close to the U.S. equivalent of the defunct *National*, which gives two pages of coverage almost every day to pro wrestling matches of the previous night, and *Weekly Fight*, a weekly newspaper which is now in its advertising billing itself as the "Japanese kayfabe sheet." Virtually all media, seeing Weekly Pro as something of competition, virtually

ignored the existence of the show. In fact, when it was announced on the Wednesday prior to the show that the UWFI had changed its match to a trios and added its biggest draw, Nobuhiko Takada, to the show, it was totally ignored except of course for Weekly Pro whose issue that came out four days before the event contained pages and pages of hype for the show. When Shinya Hashimoto and Masa Chono worked angles on the New Japan shows leading up to the Dome to build to their singles match, the angles were ignored and not covered anywhere but Weekly Pro. When it was announced that Japanese mat legends Lou Thesz and Kintaro Oki would be brought in for special ceremonies, once again, the media ignored it. The situation became so silly that the Monday *Tokyo Sports*, ran a story and photos on the WAR show and all that was said about the show that had the greatest collection of wrestling talent ever assembled on one show in history was a listing of the results with the attendance in agate, with the Dome results listed below every other wrestling show in the country, even below the independent Social Pro Wrestling Federation. Indeed, as different media writes history in Japan, this show will become the one of the most important shows in history only in publications put out by Weekly Pro, while the other media will ignore it as a minor show.

The biggest speculation coming off the show is what this means to both the future of Japanese wrestling but also the Japanese media coverage of pro wrestling. There was tremendous speculation that Weekly Pro would now run more of its own shows (it has already promoted shows for both New Japan and All Japan before this event) and use the magazine as the prime selling tool for the show with the fear that groups that don't cooperate will get both a less amount of and less favorable coverage. While nothing at all has taken place to indicate this, no company that turned over the kind of a one-day profit on an event like this is going to then decide not to try it again. There is fear from the rest of the media that by being in competition with Weekly Pro, if there are future shows of this nature, they'd be eliminated from prime access which is why so many didn't want the show to be a success the first time.

There were winners, losers and lessons to be learned from what in many ways was an even bigger and certainly was a more historic show than Wrestlemania.

The biggest thing this show established is that whatever correlation between noise made by the crowd for ring entrances and determining who is truly "over" in the sense of who gets people to buy tickets is almost incidental.

The biggest pop coming out was for Mitsuharu Misawa. In fact, the seven biggest pops for entrances and ring announcements were for the six All Japan wrestlers and for the referee of the match. With no exceptions, everyone I spoke with after the show concurred that All Japan, both the promotion and its wrestlers stole the show. Yet in no way is Misawa anywhere near the drawing card Onita is. Johnny Ace even got a tons bigger reaction coming out than Onita. Unless you consider the semi-retired Antonio Inoki, there is no bigger drawing card on the planet except for possibly Hulk Hogan, than Onita, whose retirement show which is still one month away has already almost sold out the 52,000 seats in Kawasaki Baseball Stadium for a show with no matches even announced yet.

Yet in Onita's either last or next to last match of his career (provided he doesn't return which he

almost surely will be some point) in Tokyo, his reaction wasn't even in the top ten of guys on the show. Nor was Nobuhiko Takada's, who sold out the nearby Jingu Baseball Stadium's 46,000 seats just over one year ago and whose promotion *averaged* 15,812 fans per event in 1994. Yet All Japan is struggling right now at the gate. In truth, with the exception of the seven All Japan wrestlers and Akira Maeda, nobody got a louder reaction on the show than Ryuma Go, a veteran who is this season's version of cult hero Joke, and whose name on a card doesn't sell ticket one.

Yet no matter how weak All Japan is doing this month at spot shows, they came out the kings on the biggest stage of all, on the night where to every fan in the building, it truly didn't matter who won or lost, but how they played the game. Other highlights of the show:

Best performer - With 52 wrestlers involved in so many different styles, it is truly impossible to pick out this show's Shawn Michaels. Suffice to say there were more than a dozen Michaels' on the show from Kenta Kobashi, Toshiaki Kawada, Mitsuharu Misawa, Manami Toyota, Kyoko Inoue, Terry Funk, Cactus Jack, Nobuhiko Takada, Great Sasuke, The Head Hunters and on and on it goes. Kenta Kobashi is the best, and on this night he was at his best, but there was no clear winner.

Worst performer - This was a lot easier. PWFG's Don Arakawa. For a so-called shoot group wrestler to do embarrassing Baba-like chops as comedy match spots was bad enough. The fact that his match went 16:30 didn't make matters any better.

Classiest performer - Akira Maeda. While Maeda's match with Chris Dolman was a stinker, the fans in the building would have given the still immensely popular Maeda probably the biggest non-All Japan pop of the show for beating someone that most fans realized was one of the legendary all-around freestyle fighting performers of this era. But being that it was the retirement match for Dolman, Maeda, after winning "a close match" to avenge his doing the favor for Dolman in his home town of Amsterdam in February, snuck out of the ring and even tried to get the fans not to chant his name so Dolman could bask in the glory of the big ovation as they gave him a retirement ceremony.

Greatest move - You'd think this would be a hard category as well, and it would have been, except for the fact that Terry Funk, just months before his 51st birthday, did a moonsault off the top rope *to the floor*. It's been done before, but those that have, like Rey Misterio Jr., Heavy Metal, Manami Toyota and the "inventor," Masao Orihara, were all under 25 years old and all well under 200 pounds. If that wasn't enough, when Funk got up from the move, he did the single most convincing job of selling a knee that I've ever seen in my life. I don't think there were many in the building who didn't think that was the end of his career, but in fact, he was fine and worked the next night. One of the Head Hunters, even bigger than the last time I've seen him at around 430 pounds, did a Liger flip top in the same match.

It would have been the best match but award - You put Terry Funk in one of his lifetime best performances with two 430-pound identical twins who think they're junior heavyweights and combine that with Cactus Jack, and you could have had the match of the show. And if this match were held in any other building, people would be calling it one of the great matches of

all-time. I have a hunch when the video comes out, some people will be saying that as well. But a funny thing happened on the way to the finish. A board wound up in the ring. Cactus Jack poured what appeared to be lighter fluid (lamp oil fluid) on it and tried to set it on fire. It wouldn't light. He tried again. It still wouldn't light. It was one of those moments where time stood still. Everybody in the building knew something had really screwed up. That's when the Head Hunter thought he was Liger and Funk thought he was Misterio Jr. but the crowd didn't get over that they saw the moment where nobody knew what to do. It's a good thing it happened in hindsight, though. After the match, one of the building officials went berserk on Tarzan Yamamoto (promoter) saying that if there had been a fire, they'd shut the show down immediately. It also killed Atsushi Onita for later in the show since no doubt Mr. Pogo would have blown a fireball on his head which left them with an empty match.

The best and the worst of aging - Besides Dolman, also honored on the show were Thesz and Oki. Thesz, just a few weeks before his 79th birthday, was amazing looking every bit of 20 years younger than his age. Walking to the ring proudly with Frank Sinatra's "My Way" playing in the background, Thesz for possibly the first time ever in a ring seemed to have to fight to hold back tears as he talked about his matches with Rikidozan, the Babe Ruth of Japanese wrestling, saying he remembered them as if they were yesterday (in fact, they were nearly 40 years ago). Unfortunately the same couldn't be said about his fellow honoree. Oki, 61, who held major world title recognition in the 60s in not only his home country, but also in the United States (the old WWA title in California) and in Japan and a wrestler so well respected in his home country that he later became elected to his country's senate, looked much older than his years. He had to be wheeled to the ring by Thesz in a wheelchair. Oki stood up from his chair, gave a well received speech in Japanese, and as he left the ring for the final time, before getting back in the wheelchair, kissed a ringpost and broke down and cried.

Other big winners - JWP. They opened the show and tore the house down to the point where the All Japan womens match, the one everything thought going in would steal the underneath part of the show, could not follow them. Minoru Suzuki of Pancrase. The crowd, most of whom had certainly never seen Pancrase before, gave him a huge ovation after he dispatched Christopher DeWeaver.

Other losers - Onita, minus fireball, and wearing his Great Nita get-up, hardly got the reaction one would expect from such a major celebrity. Made worse was his FMW was upstaged totally by IWA in the battle of the outrageous bloody gimmick promotions. New Japan Pro Wrestling. The biggest company in Japan and perhaps the most profitable in the world right now, was totally upstaged by All Japan. Hell, they were upstaged by almost everyone. Nobody can figure out what went through Shinya Hashimoto and Masa Chono's heads when they came up with a nothing match after following some of the most spectacular performers in the history of the business. Hashimoto didn't even get his requisite bloody nose.

And overall - This wasn't as good as the All Japan women's show at the Dome on 11/20, but aside from that, was easily the best card ever at the Tokyo Dome. I've enjoyed shows more than this one for whatever reason, whether it be crowd involvement or a memorable finish or angle,

but it has to rank as one of the best cards I've ever seen. Certainly a candidate but not a sure winner when it comes to a best show of the year since it didn't build to a climactic finish like the Super J Cup did last year and it wasn't as good a show as the All Japan women Dream Slam I that won the award the previous year. It was much better than When Worlds Collide as a comparison. The ticket offices at the Dome were closed at Noon, which was two hours before show time to indicate it was a real sellout. They had a large stage area, not as large as the women's show but large enough to block off about 3,000 seats and there were scattered blocks of empty seats in obstructed viewing areas because of the foul poles obstructing the site lines. However at the previous New Japan shows I'd been to, those seats were full so the New Japan real sellouts in 1990, 1991 and 1993 all had more fans.

1. JWP: Dynamite Kansai & Hikari Fukuoka & Candy Okutsu & Fusayo Nouchi defeated Devil Masami & Mayumi Ozaki & Cutie Suzuki & Hiroumi Yagi in 17:29. I don't know what they gave these women before the show but they've never worked like this before. All action from start-to-finish with stiff clotheslines and kicks to the face, psychology and creative spots. At one point Suzuki and Ozaki came off the top rope together with double foot stomps on Kansai. Ozaki did a 15-rep giant swing but Kansai followed with an 18-rep swing. Everyone did their big moves for near falls such as Fukuoka using a moonsault and a rolling cradle, Ozaki used her Tequila Sunrise (half nelson German suplex), Suzuki used her dragon suplex (full nelson German suplex), Kansai did a Northern Lights suplex, Kansai did a backdrop driver. Yagi just got destroyed by Kansai's team. Masami's team knocked their opponents out of the ring and climbed to the top where they did four different types of topes on them simultaneously. Suzuki did a double foot stomp off the top to the floor, Ozaki did a flip splash ala Akira Hokuto, etc. Okutsu gave Yagi a Northern Lights superplex and followed with five consecutive German suplexes with Yagi selling great. After all the dust cleared. Masami was on the top rope and Okutsu ran across the ring as if she was going to do a running Rey Misterio Jr. Frankensteiner off the top but as she got to the top, Masami caught her and threw her outside the ring to the floor with Okutsu taking a tremendous bump. However Fukuoka held Masami on the top and Kansai, who had been legdropped, recovered and they set her up for a Niagara Driver off the top rope (called Kansai's "Die Hard") for the pin. Easily the best opening match I've ever seen on a show. ****3/4

2. LLPW: Shinobu Kandori defeated Harley Saito in 1:12 of an Ultimate fight rules match. The two came out wearing karate gloves and Kandori, who got a big reaction, came out in a judo gi. They didn't try any pro wrestling, but worked it (if it was even worked, which it probably was but it held water) as if it were a UFC. Kandori took Saito down, tied her up with her legs around Saito's throat and just punched her exposed head straight down until she submitted. Saito seemed totally out of it leaving the ring as if she'd been knocked silly by the punches straight down. It's a comforting feeling to realize that you're not at all a sexist when you aren't anymore squeamish about seeing women beat each others brains in than seeing men do it.

3. AJW: Aja Kong & Kyoko Inoue beat Manami Toyota & Blizzard Yuki (Sakie Hasegawa under a mask) in what was billed as "The Best Four" match in 17:40. Kong came out in a smoking jacket and with her girth and the way she walked to the ring, she looked like a black Jackie

Gleason (I know that reference is dated but she didn't look like any of today's celebrities). Akira Hokuto was at ringside for this match. Toyota had won the WWWA title from Kong the previous Sunday so it was Kong's turn for revenge. All the great moves back-and-forth in this one as well. Among the highlights were Yuki doing four straight double-arm suplexes on Kyoko. Toyota with two straight dropkicks off the middle rope. Kyoko climbing the ropes in the middle and twisting off the springboard into a dropkick in the ring. Kyoko used a Romero special on Yuki. Kong and Kyoko twisted Toyota into ungodly shapes with submission holds. Kyoko did her running across the ring climbing the ropes and falling back in with the elbow drop spot. Yuki did a Liger flip tope while Toyota did a springboard plancha simultaneously. Toyota then did an Asai-moonsault off the top rope. Kyoko got several near falls on Yuki, who made a comeback giving five uranage suplexes. Kyoko reversed Toyota's first attempt at a Japanese Ocean Cyclone suplex into her own German suplex. All kinds of near falls back and forth including Kong getting Toyota on her shoulders and Kyoko coming off the top rope with an elbow ala the old Southern Boys jawbreaker for a near fall. Kyoko used her Niagara driver and Toyota the Japanese Ocean Cyclone suplex and Kong with the backhand punch all for near falls. Kong finally pinned Toyota gaining her revenge with a version of a Northern lights superplex. After the match Hokuto came into the ring and popped the crowd pretty big talking about future matches with both Kong and with Toyota. ****1/2

Thesz came out to the Sinatra song and gave a speech about how the athletic version of pro wrestling was the greatest sport in the world. Unfortunately, the timing of this ceremony wasn't well planned considering what followed.

4. Go Gundan: In an incredibly bizarre yet entertaining abomination, Ryuma Go pinned Uchu Majin Silver X in what was billed as an Alien death match for the Interplanetary title in 15:11. Go's reaction was absolutely scary although it was all an inside joke that everyone was part of. Silver X was accompanied by three other space Aliens, the Jewish Alien with a star of David, and two farm boy aliens wearing alien masks and bib overalls known as Demonios I & II. The only question was whether or not these guys were illegal aliens. The match was mainly Go giving all the aliens clotheslines. Silver X resembled a younger Jody Hamilton as far as the way he moved. Finally they got heat on Go when one of the Farm Boys smashed his knee up with a chair. Go came back and caught X with the STF but the Jewish Alien did a run-in for the save. The crowd reacted like an ECW crowd in that they were doing crazy chants from start to finish to make up for the fact this match was so awful nobody could stop laughing at it but they were laughing hysterically. It was great and terrible but they were out there for way too long. X wears a hockey mask but when Go made his comeback doing head-butts, he still sold them. At another point one of the Farm boys went to do a run-in, realized it wasn't his spot, and simply walked back out of the ring without touching Go. Go finally won with a flying clothesline. *

5. IWA: In a barbed wire barricade barbed wire baseball bat tornado death match, Terry Funk & Shoji Nakamaki & Leatherface (Rick Patterson) beat Cactus Jack & The Head Hunters in 18:28. This was the most amazing clusterfuck of incredible moves that you'll ever see. If someone edits this right, it'll look like one of the greatest matches of all-time. The match started with all six men at the top of the ramp about 60 yards from the ring with a barbed wire baseball

bat in mid-ring. The idea of these six in a footrace is bizarre enough, but they were doing a countdown from ten-to-one and at seven, Cactus took off. Since it was tornado rules, they were brawling everywhere and throwing chair shots everywhere with blood everywhere and absolutely no focus. Nakamaki and Funk both bled like crazy, Nakamaki doing the faucet job. Leatherface, who had just turned babyface for this group on Cactus Jack only a few weeks ago, walked out leaving his bloody partners to be slaughtered. Jack power bombed Funk threw a table. Head Hunters were doing splashes and legdrops off the top rope. Jack did his elbow drop off the apron and caught his throat in between the ropes (you'd think after losing an ear doing this move that he wouldn't want to do it again). Hunters threw Funk into the barbed wire barricade and one did an elbow drop off the top for a near fall. Just as the Hunters made a Nakamaki sandwich out of two boards with barbed wire and one got up top to do a moonsault, Leatherface returned with his chainsaw. They hit the moonsault just before Leather hit the ring and chainsawed Jack in the arm (heavy juice) and both Hunters in the face. Leather, who looks to be in the 320 range, did a moonsault on one of the Hunters for a near fall. The other Head Hunter did a superplex on Leather. At this point Jack brings a door-sized board into the ring and tries to light it on fire but the fire doesn't work. The crowd suddenly died realizing that they had screwed up what appeared to be the finish so Funk started throwing chairs everywhere including straight up and hitting him in the head. Jack suplexed Nakamaki on the board and suplexed the board on Funk. One of the Hunters did a Liger flip tope. Leather then did a plancha. Jack did his clothesline over the top with Funk. One of the Hunters had Nakamaki on his shoulders and Jack came off the top rope bulldogged him onto the board. Jack was on the top again and Leather, who was outside the ring, got on the apron, and bodyslammed Jack off the top rope onto the floor. Funk then did the Orihara moonsault out of the ring onto Jack & Hunters and got up selling his knee like his career was over. Inside the ring Nakamaki whipped Hunter B face first into the barbed wire board he had set up by the turnbuckles, and as he came back off backwards, Nakamaki schoolboyed him for the pin. ****

6. Pancrase: Minoru Suzuki made Christopher DeWeaver submit to an Achilles heel hold in 1:50. Suzuki got a great reaction for winning. It had a totally realistic look to it.

7. Pro Wrestling Fujiwara Gumi: Yoshiaki Fujiwara & Yuki Ishikawa beat Carl Greco & Don Arakawa in 16:30. Arakawa did all comedy in what is supposed to be a shoot group. Match was awful when he was in and way too long. Ishikawa and Greco (a trainee of the late Larry Malenko) did a shoot style so it was solid wrestling when they were in. Ishikawa made Greco submit to a headscissors armlock combination. 1/2*

8. Michinoku Pro: Super Delfin & Taka Michinoku & Gran Naniwa beat Great Sasuke & Sato & Shiryu in 22:25. This was almost move-for-move the exact same match they did at the Tokyo Dome for the womens show but with Sasuke healthy he pulled out more stops. Very smooth and entertaining and pretty much after the show everyone was praising the guys. Naniwa did the AAA heel fake foul spot but in Japan it's taken as comedy rather than a heat spot. They did a lot of comedy in the middle and then picked it up with the hot moves and near falls at the end. They did a five dive spot at the end with Sasuke doing the Asai-moonsault and Michinoku climaxing with a great springboard flying tackle outside the ring. Sasuke then did a running

dive where he just sailed over the top rope with a flip ala Liger but got way more height and distance. Delfin pinned Shiryu with the swinging DDT and Delfin clutch. They did what appeared to be the beginnings of an angle after the match as Sato got mad at Shiryu for losing and it wound up with all three faces walking out on their own in different directions. ****1/4

9. Rings: Akira Maeda beat Chris Dolman in 5:29. There was more intensity in the crowd leading up to this match than any match on the show and Maeda got the biggest reaction thus far coming out. It was a totally nothing match but the crowd was into it. Both guys grabbed an Achilles heel hold simultaneously and the bell rang and nobody knew which man had given up until Maeda's arm was raised. Maeda then left the ring so Dolman could bask in the cheers as he announced his retirement saying that Rings style is the toughest and most complete fighting style in the world. DUD

10. UWFI: Nobuhiko Takada & Billy Scott & Masahito Kakihara beat Gary Albright & Jean Lydick & Kazuo Yamazaki in 15:17. Yamazaki started and wanted Takada but Takada sent Scott in first. They went at it for the first 4:40. Kakihara and Lydick, who have something of a feud and are the best workers of the group's non main eventers, were in next and were great. Kakihara is so fast with his hands and feet and Lydick takes it well. Takada tagged in and threw his kicks and Lydick who tagged Yamazaki. They worked well back-and-forth. Takada has this look about him where he's just always in control of the situation. Yamazaki then tagged to Albright which got a big pop and Takada immediately tagged Scott which brought out a lot of boos aimed at Takada, but he was so composed. It was interesting to see a face of sorts since UWFI doesn't have faces and heels work a situation to where he'd get booed at the time to build up heat for later in the match. Albright did a great German suplex on Scott and went for the dragon suplex but Scott made the ropes. Finally Takada tagged in with Albright and threw his kicks and Albright clamped on the full nelson to go for his dragon suplex but Takada made the ropes. Takada made a comeback and got Albright in the armbreaker but he made the ropes and tagged to Lydick. Takada almost immediately unloaded on Lydick and got the armbreaker submission. Match was excellent except it was too short in that it left you wanting more. The 15:00 felt like 5:00 because it was no intense. ***3/4

11. FMW: Great Nita (Atsushi Onita) pinned King Pogo (Mr. Pogo aka Tetsuo Sekigawa) in 13:59 of an explosive barbed wire match. They used a different ring set up with the gimmicks for this match than for all the other matches. Part of the problem was this ring was deep in left field and the way the Tokyo Dome is set up is that the seating is almost all facing home plate with very few seats on that side of the stadium so this was far away from all but the fans in the corner of the left field bleachers which hurt overall crowd reactions. The fans in the bleachers by the ring reacted well so the match wasn't really as bad as the crowd reactions may have made it seem but overall to those attending it was not a highlight. Nita was blown up first after being thrown into the barbed wire. Pogo then got a hatchet handed to him by one of his teammates and he drove it in Nita's back and twirled it around so Nita juiced from the back. He then put it in his mouth and began ripping the mouth. Nita got it away from him and did a dance with it like it was nunchakus. Nita got blown up a second time for a near fall. Pogo then got a barbed wire baseball bat handed to him and used it on Nita. Nita got the bat away and started doing a

baseball swing on him knocking him into the barbed wire where he was blown up. They brawled for a while and Pogo went into the barbed wire again and Nita fell on him for the pin which was a weird finish. After the match Nita poured water and revived Pogo to wake him up and stayed in the ring a long time waiting for a big pop that didn't come his way. **

12. All Japan: Mitsuharu Misawa & Kenta Kobashi & Stan Hansen drew Toshiaki Kawada & Akira Taue & Johnny Ace over 30:00. Ace replaced Steve Williams who missed the tour (more on that later). These guys are noticeably better live than they are on television and that's saying a lot. The work was so stiff that you could hear every blow 100 yards away and the heat was incredible from start-to-finish. They do all the big moves but their ability and psychology is a level above anything else in pro wrestling now or probably anytime in the past since athletes continually get better. They did all the near falls that looked like the finish back-and-forth with Ace and Taue in particular picking their game up to where at no point in the match did either look out of place with Misawa, Kobashi and Kawada. With a few minutes to go, Hansen hit the lariat on Ace but managed to tag out but sold it the rest of the way leaving it as a 3-on-2. Taue & Kawada were the ones getting the near falls on Misawa and Hansen over the past few minutes including Taue hitting Misawa's own Tiger driver on him just before the bell. The only negative about the match is that in this position on the show it should have had a longer time limit but this would easily rank as the best mens match ever held at the Tokyo Dome. ****3/4

13. New Japan: Shinya Hashimoto pinned Masa Chono in 15:57. Chono came to the ring with Hiroyoshi Tenzan and Hiro Saito while Hashimoto had Hiroshi Hase and Tadao Yasuda in his corners. The opening was hot but then the match got real slow with Hashimoto mainly working on Chono's shoulder and Chono working on Hashimoto's knee. About ten days earlier they did a series of angles on New Japan shows where Chono and his army "injured" Hashimoto's knee and elbow and Hashimoto came back and "injured" Chono's shoulder. The matwork was solid but they didn't get up and start doing the big moves until the 15:00 call and went right to the finish with Hashimoto winning with a brainbuster. After the match Tenzan and Hashimoto argued with Tenzan challenging him to a title match. It's hard to figure what they were thinking doing a match this bad after all those hot matches underneath. *1/4

OCTOBER 9, 1995

Notes: If you ask about the biggest Tokyo Dome show ever, not the best, but the biggest, this show or the 1998 Antonio Inoki retirement show would have to be the picks. The story went back years and involved two people who at one time were key players with New Japan Pro Wrestling, the elder statesman they were using years earlier in Lou Thesz, and Nobuhiko Takada, one of the most promising and best wrestlers they had started in the 80s. In 1984, Takada, who by this time was like the little brother of Akira Maeda, had left New Japan for the original UWF, where he was groomed as the rising young star. When that promotion folded, Takada came back to New Japan, and had incredible matches in the junior heavyweight division with the likes of Shiro Koshinaka and Hiroshi Hase. He then left to form the second UWF, by which time he was a signature star. When that company folded, Takada became the top star for UWFI, an offshoot group that pushed itself as shooting, with Takada as the supreme shooter,

with backing from Thesz, Billy Robinson and Danny Hodge, who represented the idea of real wrestling to the Japanese public. Thesz, like he did in his day when there were multiple world champions, would make grandstand challenges to the other champions. He challenged all the pro wrestling world champions, and UWFI signed Vader, the WCW champion, for, what was at the time one of the most lucrative short-term deals ever, to do a three-match series with Takada. WCW was furious when Vader, their champion, tapped to an armbar before more than 48,000 fans at Jingu Stadium in Tokyo. Thesz continually said that Takada would beat Masahiro Chono, New Japan's biggest star, a statement that carried weight because Chono was a protégé of Thesz, and his winning move, the STF, came directly from the historical legend. Thesz carried so much credibility with the press, and Takada looked and could work the part of a shooter, even if it later became clear he really wasn't. Because of that, New Japan was pretty much forced into negotiations they didn't want, and nothing happened from them. UWFI went through a tough period. After Vader, Takada didn't have opponents that could draw the same level of interest. And the key blow was when UFC and MMA became popular, which threatened UWFI as the real deal because it wasn't. The Graces became myths and fans wanted to know why Takada didn't enter a UFC tournament or challenge Rickson or Royce Gracie. UWFI talked with Rickson, but Rickson would not lose to Takada. Then, in a move that backfired, Yoji Anjyo, one of the toughest guys in the UWFI dojo, figured since he was bigger than Rickson, he could beat him. He went to the Rickson Gracie dojo in Torrance, CA, looking for a fight. Rickson was in bed when he got the phone call that a large Japanese man was causing a disturbance and wanting to fight him. Because of the negotiations, Gracie figured it was Takada trying to goad him into something. He didn't know Takada from Anjyo, but accepted the fight on the spot, and gave Anjyo a horrible beating. That was okay in Japan, as to the public, Rickson was a fighting legend and submission master, like, in their minds, a modern Karl Gotch, Thesz or Robinson. But when it came out how badly Anjyo was beaten up, the UWFI fans wanted Takada to avenge it. When Takada didn't, and MMA became more popular, simulated MMA, or shoot style pro wrestling, faded in popularity. With UWFI in financial disarray, they came to New Japan for help. New Japan recognized the business they could do, and agreed to work with UWFI, but only if they had full control of the booking. This feud was not about business, although it was the best drawing program in history with Takada drawing three straight Tokyo Dome sellouts. But the story was not give-and-take, although Takada did get one big win, but simply about New Japan proving to the fans that their pro wrestlers were tougher than the shooters. But when Takada, the Thesz-backed UWFI world champion, was to face Keiji Muto, he IWGP world champion, it broke the all-time gate record for pro wrestling and to this day would be high on any list of the biggest pro wrestling matches in Japanese history. From an historical perspective, the opener became famous as well because it involved two unknown newcomers, Yuji Nagata, a former national champion amateur, and Kazushi Sakuraba, a college wrestling star who would go on to a Hall of Fame career as an MMA fighter and for a time was a Japanese national sports hero. On May 1, 2000, at this very same Tokyo Dome, Sakuraba beat Royce Gracie, when Rorion Gracie threw in the towel at the 90 minute mark of a no time limit MMA fight.

retained his IWGP world heavyweight title via submission with a figure four leglock in 16:16 over UWFI's Nobuhiko Takada.

The combined New Japan/UWFI show on 10/9 at the Tokyo Dome set an all-time gate record for pro wrestling of \$6.1 million. The overflow crowd of 57,000, which included 2,200 standing room tickets sold the day of the show, was the largest crowd for any indoor event ever in Tokyo. It was also the largest pro wrestling crowd ever in Japan, breaking the record of 54,500 set on March 21, 1991 for a Ric Flair vs. Tatsumi Fujinami match in the same building. It was the fifth largest recorded crowd in the history of pro wrestling, trailing the two New Japan shows in North Korea on 4/28 and 4/29, the Hogan-Andre match in 1987 at the Pontiac Silverdome and the 1992 SummerSlam from Wembley Stadium in London, England. Most Tokyo Dome sellouts in recent years have ranged from 50,000 to 52,500 because it is now traditional to build elaborate entrance stages which blocks off thousands of outfield seats, but they didn't build a big stage for this show since the heat was based on hardcore wrestling lure and rather than a traditional special major spectacular event. This enabled them to pack more fans in. With program sales alone grossing \$460,000 (23,000 sold at \$20 a pop), the total merchandising revenue for the show was just under \$2 million--another all-time record. The total one-day gross for the show topped \$8 million. With the exception of Wrestlemanias III through VII, no show has ever taken in more money for a promotion and this was the largest in history of any show without PPV technology factored in.

While New Japan has been from a business standpoint, the promotion of the year for this and probably any other year by drawing five crowds in excess of 38,000 fans in one year, it appeared that the booking of this show was more from a power and ego position rather than a long-term business perspective, particularly the main event finish.

This promotion vs. promotion program was put together largely because UWFI was in financially bad shape and was rumored to be on the brink of falling apart. Several key personnel had left the promotion, in particular Kazuo Yamazaki, Gary Albright and Lou Thesz, all over money problems. Super Vader, who never officially left the promotion, hadn't returned since losing the group's world title to Takada in April. Takada himself, who had been protected from his own weaknesses (his own somewhat flighty personality) during his heyday in 1993-94. But of late he was exposed in announcing his retirement, immediately changing his mind and denying he was going into politics, then changing his mind again and running for the House of Councilors after filing on the last day possible and losing in embarrassing fashion, and finally returning back to pro wrestling with significant loss of popularity. However, after the match with Muto was announced, he was thrust into a hot position and all the negatives were seemingly forgotten as the match, because of the world title vs. world title and interpromotional intrigue, became the biggest match in pro wrestling anywhere in the world in many years. After the show had sold out, Takada held a press conference where he revealed that Thesz had taken his world title belt back and was no longer affiliated with UWFI, and thus Takada was no longer recognized as a world heavyweight champion.

New Japan was basically in the position of saving UWFI, a promotion that had attempted to

embarrass them publicly a few times over the past years, from extinction with this program. This gave New Japan booker Riki Choshu power to call virtually all the shots. Not only did New Japan take the main event win, which seemingly didn't make business sense (the only justification would be that the finish would surprise people, but when a surprise doesn't make sense in terms of long-term booking, what does one accomplish with a surprise?), but also won five of the eight matches overall. The Masa Chono vs. Yuko Miyato match was cancelled at a press conference on 10/5. It was the same press conference where the final announcement was made that Muto would be defending the IWGP title against Takada. At the press conference it was announced Miyato had an injured left knee, although the fact Miyato didn't come to the press conference made some believe the injury was a cover story. Miyato had been the public voice of UWFI making the grandstand challenges to New Japan wrestlers and to Akira Maeda among others over the years, and was along with Yoji Anjyo and Ken Suzuki, the three who ran the company's business. Fans left the show with the distinct impression that the UWFI so-called shooters and style were second-rate in comparison with New Japan. If this was a one-shot deal, New Japan did the right thing for its status as the top company in Japan (and the world) and its business. But with the interest and money this drew and had the potential of doing for the future, Takada needed to win the first match to give the underdog promotion credibility for a long-term feud. If Takada would have won, there would have been tremendous interest in Muto training to get the IWGP title back for New Japan at the January Tokyo Dome. However, by Muto winning, much of the mystique Takada had of being the real deal was lost and that was his main credibility and drawing power. I'm not sure what the behind-the-scenes situation was leading to this other than at least at one point, the booking plan was for Takada to win the first match and then surprise everyone by having Takada win the second match in January as well before Muto finally got a win.

Instead, New Japan won all its matches against the submission fighters by using submissions, with three of the five finishes being the UWFI favorite armbreaker (short arm scissors) being used against them, thereby killing their gimmick as submission fighting specialists. New Japan won both the final and the semi-final (Shinya Hashimoto beating Tatsuo Nakano) with UWFI's biggest win coming third from the top as Masahito Kakihara upset Kensuke Sasaki. Takada himself lost to a figure four leglock, a move not even considered legitimate in UWFI because in a realistic situation, while the move does work when applied, it is virtually impossible to put on. However, the figure four, which hasn't been considered a major finisher in Japan since the days of The Destroyer, will no doubt gain in heat and popularity due to it being the finish of this match.

With the exception of the Jushin Liger vs. Naoki Sano match, which was worked New Japan style with high spots and flying moves worked in with the submissions, all matches were fairly short and mostly devoid of high spots to give them the "realistic" feel. By that standard, the show didn't have the quality of matches as most previous Tokyo Dome shows and major Japanese shows have. However, there was more heat than any show ever at the Tokyo Dome. Every match was said to have super heat which made it a great show to watch to go along with the historical nature of the show because of the promotion vs. promotion rivalry. The crowd was

solidly behind New Japan, going crazy for every ring entrance and most offensive moves. The UWFI wrestlers were somewhat booed, with Yoji Anjyo, its booker, being booed like crazy against Choshu, who got the biggest pop.

The show airs on 10/14 and 10/21 on New Japan's regular television show on TV-Asahi.

1. Tokimitsu Ishizawa & Yuji Nagata over New Japan beat Kazushi Sakuraba & Hiromitsu Kanehara in 10:47 when Ishizawa made Sakuraba submit to the armbreaker.

2. Shinjiro Otani of New Japan made Kenichi Yamamoto submit in 7:18 with a chicken wing cross face.

3. In an upset, UWFI prelim wrestler Yoshihiro Takayama made Takashi Iizuka submit to the Fujiwara armbar in 7:39.

4. Naoki Sano of UWFI pinned Jushin Liger after two dragon suplexes in 10:14 of a match worked pro wrestling style. Liger made the decision himself to put Sano over to create Sano as a new rival for him in 1996 and rekindle their famous feud from 1989-90. Liger used a koppo kick at the bell. The two did some flying but nothing elaborate, and teased topes without doing any. At the end the two starting trading submissions with Liger using a figure four and Sano an STF. Liger made a comeback until missing a diving head-butt off the top rope. The two traded submissions before Sano got the pin.

5. Choshu beat Anjyo in 4:45 with the scorpion deathlock. At the press conference, Anjyo said he 200% guaranteed victory (which was about the same percentage he used last year when talking about Rickson Gracie). Anjyo came out with kicks but Choshu didn't really sell them. Choshu used short head-butts and his amateur wrestling skill to take down and control Anjyo, before finally turning him over in the scorpion. Anjyo escaped and turned it into an Achilles heel submission (it is well known Choshu tore his Achilles heel a few years ago), but Choshu got out and used a back suplex, an ultra-stiff lariat and the scorpion to gain the submission finish.

6. In the one booking concession, UWFI's Masahito Kakihara beat Sasaki in 9:03 with an Achilles tendon submission. The two traded fast slaps early before Sasaki took Kakihara down. Kakihara came back with kicks before Sasaki got his Power special submission hold on but Kakihara made the ropes. Sasaki dominated since he was doing the job, using arm and shoulder submissions while Kakihara came back with the choke sleeper. Sasaki got a bloody nose from Kakihara's fast palm blows and eventually got the heel hold for the submission.

7. Shinya Hashimoto made Tatsuo Nakano submit in 7:20. Hashimoto didn't sell Nakano's early kicks and because of the huge size difference and Hashimoto's rep, it looked like a mismatch. Nakano did use a German suplex and some submissions before Hashimoto made the comeback using a DDT, a brainbuster, a sleeper, a koppo kick and his combination DDT brainbuster maneuver before locking the armbreaker.

8. Muto retained the title over Takada. The first half of the match was slow-paced with them mainly trading holds on the mat. Takada's main weapon was his fast kicks, but Muto would eventually either catch the foot and throw Takada down, or use dragon screw takedowns.

Finally Muto got the figure four on but Takada made the ropes. Muto got on top before missing a moonsault. Takada unloaded with kicks, knocking Muto down and they teased a knockout but Muto got up well before the ten count. Takada went back to the kicks before Muto again caught the leg and worked on it before going to a second figure four in the middle of the ring for the submission.

JANUARY 4, 1996

Keiji Muto and Nobuhiko Takada officially went into the record books this week as the biggest drawing feud in pro wrestling history after drawing their second consecutive sellout to the Tokyo Dome. Takada captured the IWGP heavyweight championship with a cross armbreaker (UFC armbar) in 17:51 in the rematch of the 10/9 match which drew the largest live gate in wrestling history.

New Japan's traditional biggest event of the year, which occurs every January 4th, entitled this year "1996 Wrestling War in Tokyo Dome," was built once again around the same New Japan vs. UWFI matches that set the record in October. This version drew a turnaway crowd of 54,000 fans, selling out nearly two weeks in advance, and a gate estimated at between \$5 and \$6 million along with a television audience estimated at 14 million. It was probably the second largest live gate in history (certainly no lower than third on the all-time list), was the ninth largest recorded crowd in history and the third largest crowd ever in Japan. Barring a surprise, this will turn out to be the biggest money show of 1996.

Although Muto and Takada were the main event, it was Antonio Inoki and Big Van Vader who stole the show, drawing by far the most heat with a match which Inoki won with the cross armbreaker in 14:16. Inoki, who turns 53 later this month, allowed himself to absorb a Cactus Jack-like beating from Vader in order to get the match over as a classic. It was reported to us that this was the single greatest performance of Vader's career, and if you factor in his age, probably of Inoki's as well.

The show, which started at 3 p.m., was edited down to two hours that night (airing Muto vs. Takada, Inoki vs. Vader, Hiroshi Hase vs. Kensuke Sasaki and Jushin Liger's victory over Koji Kanemoto to win the IWGP jr. heavyweight title along with finishing clips from the other matches) for a prime time network special of TV-Asahi. The show did an overall 10.1 rating, which was a disappointment for the network which was hoping for a 15.

Surprisingly, the largest audience was for the Muto-Takada title match rather than the Inoki match, doing a 13.8 rating. Still, TV-Asahi officials were pleased enough that they are interested in doing one or two more live television specials in 1996.

Videos of the show had already all hit video stores in Los Angeles amazingly by the next afternoon and much of the rest of the West Coast by Saturday. The rest of the card will air over the next few weeks of the regular Saturday night New Japan television show.

Vader was the only American wrestler to work the show, which is more evidence that the Japanese business has less need right now for foreigners, particularly Americans which their business for decades was built on, than ever before. The record-breaking Tokyo Dome show in

October contained no foreign talent.

With the two Dome shows, New Japan successfully accomplished all its goals for the UWFI feud:

- 1) It clearly established New Japan as the group with the "toughest guys" and destroyed the UWFI shooting myth and shooting aura dead in its tracks. In fact, there were no chants for any of the UWFI wrestlers on the show;
- 2) It sold out two Tokyo Domes;
- 3) It still came out with Nobuhiko Takada in position where he should be able to successfully headline against all the top New Japan guys in 1996 on major shows. They tried to emphasize that Takada is the first wrestler in history to hold all three IWGP titles (heavyweight, junior heavyweight and tag team);
- 4) It was able to make an even more serious looking style marketable to the general public but getting its own wrestlers over as the ones who were the most real and most serious.

All reports we received were that this was a very good show. It was different from previous years in that the matches were shorter, since they were doing a more serious style, with the card lasting three-and-a-half hours as opposed to close to five hours in the past.

Most of the matches were said to have been good, with two of them, Vader vs. Inoki and Liger vs. Kanemoto said to have been outstanding.

1. Yuji Nagata & Shinjiro Otani & Tokimitsu Ishizawa of New Japan defeated Kenichi Yamamoto & Kazushi Sakuraba & Hiromitsu Kanehara of UWFI when Nagata made Yamamoto submit to a cross armbreaker in 10:15 in a heated opener.

Current note: This opening match was super heated with the young stars of New Japan vs. Young stars of UWFI. It became legendary historically because Nagata and Sakuraba, both unknowns at the time, not only worked hot stuff with each other, but both would go on to be two of the biggest stars in history. It wasn't that many years later that Nagata was the biggest star in New Japan and Sakuraba was the biggest star in Pride. In 1999, Kenichi Yamamoto would win a UFC tournament and in 2000 he got and lost in a UFC welterweight title match against Pat Miletich.

2. Hiroyoshi Tenzan pinned Satoshi Kojima in 9:24 with a diving head-butt. Kojima returned from CWA in Europe for this show. Kojima didn't get over big on his return, as apparently while in Austria, he was taught to wrestle just like Tenzan (who worked there the previous year) so the two did a match where they did the same spots to each other, but in Japan, Tenzan has been working like that for one year.

3. Liger pinned Kanemoto with the stardust press (Hayabusa's finisher) in 18:59 to capture the junior heavyweight title. Told this was a fantastic match as well with both men pulling out every move in their arsenals for near falls back-and-forth including Liger doing an Asai-moonsault out of the ring and Kanemoto doing a dive as well. Liger used three Liger-bombs and a

backbreaker to set up the finisher, which I'll describe next week when I get to see it for myself.

4. Shiro Koshinaka of HI pinned Masa Chono in 9:49 after two power bombs with a small package. Not one of the better matches on the show. The "surprise" result makes sense later in the show.

5. Hiromichi Fuyuki of WAR pinned Yoji Anjoh of UWFI in 6:42 of what was described as an American style garbage match. Fuyuki and Anjoh are the two most hated of the Japanese wrestlers so this was a battle of the big heels and both were booed. This match completely killed the UWFI gimmick since Anjoh willingly did a gimmick style match. Gedo & Jado came with Fuyuki and interfered numerous times, right in front of the ref. The UWFI guys in Anjoh's corner like Yoshihiro Takayama and Tatsuo Nakano, wound up fighting with Gedo & Jado outside the ring. Anjoh sprayed something in Fuyuki's face on one or two occasions. It ended up with Gedo & Jado pulling out duct tape and they taped all over Anjoh's face to make him look like a mummy and did a triple piledriver on him to lead to the pin. Although in some ways it was a comedy match, they did nothing for humor but there was a big pop when Fuyuki put the tape over Anjoh's mouth because everyone hates Anjoh because he's got a big mouth. This match made the point loud and clear because Anjoh did a job for someone who was considered a smaller promotion gimmick wrestler.

6. Kensuke Sasaki pinned Hiroshi Hase in 16:36 with the Northern lights bomb. Sasaki came out wearing the U.S. heavyweight title. Hase wasn't in his best condition since he's now a full-time senator in the Japanese Congress, but is a good enough and smart enough worker to still have a very good match although he got tired. After the match they did a ceremony and Hase thanked the fans for supporting him for the past ten years and he and Sasaki both cried in the ring and a lot of the fans cried as well. They never mentioned the word retirement (although the fans were certainly left with that impression) and Sasaki said he can't wait for Hase to return some day.

7. Inoki forced Vader to submit in 14:16. Lots of power moves and near falls. We'll have a complete description next week but the highlights including Vader throwing Inoki around hard with an unprotected German suplex and also doing a moonsault, both of which Inoki kicked out of at 2.9. Both men juiced, Vader juicing big-time and Inoki receiving a hardway cut under the eye similar to a boxer because he wanted Vader to work stiff with him. After a powerslam, Inoki quickly clamped the armbreaker on for the submission.

Current notes: While perhaps not the best match of the early 1/4 shows, this may have been the most memorable, as it was the last truly great match of Inoki's career.

8. Riki Choshu beat Masahito Kakihara of UWFI submit in 5:46 with the scorpion deathlock after his trademark lariat. Choshu blocked Kakihara's kicks and pretty much wouldn't sell for his style even though up to this point New Japan had kept Kakihara protected since taking over the company as he hadn't done any jobs. In that way it wasn't a good match.

Current notes: Kakihara would contract cancer young, and in a feelgood moment was the surprise winner of the 2018 Rumble style Battle Royal at the Tokyo Dome.

9. Shinya Hashimoto pinned Kazuo Yamazaki in 9:18 after a brainbuster. The storyline here is that Yamazaki was "knocked out" by a dangerous DDT by Hashimoto, but still kicked out but never fully recovered and "couldn't remember" the final moments of the match. It was Yamazaki's first job in a singles match since joining New Japan. Hashimoto's big win would set up his IWGP title match with Takada in April which also sold out the Tokyo Dome.

10. Takada won the title from Muto. The match had great heat but Muto wasn't at his best in the first half and never really put Takada over until the finish. Takada didn't look that good and Muto didn't do much early. The finish was said to have been even better than the finish of their first match (which, even if you disagree with the end result, was an excellent finish). After the match, they got Muto out of the ring quickly (I believe he's taking time off to do a movie) and Koshinaka hit the ring. Takada and Koshinaka have a major rivalry in 1986-87 dating back to the IWGP junior heavyweight and tag team titles. Koshinaka challenged for the title (explaining his win over Chono) and basically claimed he had Takada's number (since Koshinaka won the jr. title from Takada at the end of the feud) but Takada said there were more worthy challengers such as Hashimoto. Hashimoto (explaining his win over Yamazaki, whose style is closest to Takada's of anyone) then grabbed the mic and said that he was the No. 1 contender and the two had an in-ring stare-down. After that, Sasaki also hit the ring and said that he was going to be the one to regain the belt for New Japan, so they basically have the next six months of business set up.

Current note: The October through April Takada run on top of New Japan was its biggest business period in history with three Tokyo Dome sellouts. Takada, Muto and Hashimoto all came out of the program as all-time legends.

The following was the review of the top matches on the television show:

1. Jushin Liger pinned Koji Kanemoto to win the IWGP jr. heavyweight title. It was a great match but it was hurt because the Dome is the worst place in the world to watch wrestling because of how poorly sound travels. Liger kept getting near falls using moves like three fisherman busters, a brainbuster and a German suplex without the bridge. He also used a plancha off the top to the floor. Kanemoto took over when Liger missed a Frankensteiner off the top and hit a few moves for near falls until missing a moonsault. The two then did a sequence of blocking their standard moves. Kanemoto then used a Frankensteiner off the top, a Liger bomb and a moonsault for near falls and followed with a Tiger suplex and a second moonsault before he missed a rolling senton. The finish saw Kanemoto kick out of four Liger bombs before Liger hit a move off the top which was basically a rolling senton. It was Liger's seventh IWGP jr. title win. ****

2. Kensuke Sasaki pinned Hiroshi Hase with a Northern lights bomb in Hase's final match, at least for now. Hase wasn't in his best shape and when that happens with a guy who gets over mainly on his work, it means more than if a guy who gets over on charisma isn't in top shape. The two tried hard but between the lack of crowd reaction and the somewhat sloppy execution, the match wasn't as good as you'd expect from these two. Unlike as reported here last week, Sasaki didn't wear the U.S. title to the ring, which is probably a smart idea as what would be the

up-side of calling attention to that situation? *3/4.

3. Antonio Inoki made Big Van Vader submit to an armbreaker. This was the best match on the show. Inoki's ring entrance and the crowd reaction for it was among the greatest I've ever seen starting off with a woman playing Inoki's theme music with a giant harp. Vader has put on a lot of weight. It's hard to estimate with someone that big but if you told me 440, I'd say it could be legit. Given Inoki's age and Vader's weight, you'd think by looking at it that it wouldn't be that great. But it was. Both juiced. The psychology was incredible, the heat was great and the work was stiff. Not a lot of fancy moves but enough to get by. The highlight was Vader giving Inoki one of the most brutal German suplexes I've ever seen and Inoki selling it like he was dead. I'd rate this match as similar in quality to the Flair-Vader match at Starrcade '93. Basically after taking a horrible pounding, Inoki caught Vader coming off the ropes with a scoop slam and quickly used the armbreaker. ****1/4.

4. Riki Choshu made Masahito Kakihara submit to the scorpion. Choshu didn't sell anything for Kakihara and pretty well embarrassed him, but it wasn't boring to watch. *.

5. Nobuhiko Takada won the IWGP heavyweight title from Keiji Muto in 17:14. Similar in quality to their first match. The first 5:00 consisted of good mat wrestling back-and-forth. It slowed down from that point and even got boring until about the 11:00 mark. Like the first match, the last few minutes were excellent with stiff kicks and lots of submissions with rope breaks going back-and-forth with great heat. The highlight spot was Muto using a leg whip and going for the figure four, the finish of their previous match, and Takada reversing it into a heel hold, but Muto reversing it into a figure four before they got to the ropes. Takada got the armbreaker, but Muto made the ropes. After several kicks, he got the armbreaker again for the submission. The strength of this television show were the pre-match features before every match building up to the story leading to the match. The weakness was that they cut away from every match almost the moment the bell rang so a lot of important post-match material after title switches, Hase's speech with the fans teary-eyed, Inoki's celebration and the challenges to new champ Takada didn't air on television. By trying to cram too much wrestling into the show, they limited the impact of the wrestling they were showing. ***3/4

APRIL 29, 1996

Notes: This was the end of the Takada trilogy of three straight Tokyo Dome sellouts. There was an implied promise when Takada dropped the title back that he'd get to even the score with Hashimoto, but it never happened and he never wrestled in New Japan again. New Japan got what it wanted out of it. New Japan won at first when Muto won the first match, and the most memorable match of the series with Takada. And then Hashimoto, who New Japan was marketing as their shooter, got to beat Takada as well.

Shinya Hashimoto captured the IWGP heavyweight championship from Nobuhiko Takada via cross armbreaker submission to headline the 4/29 Tokyo Dome show which drew the second largest crowd in the history of Japanese wrestling and what is believed to be the second largest live gate in the history of pro wrestling.

The card, entitled "'96 Battle Formation," drew a sellout crowd announced at 65,000 fans (real figure closer to 55,000). The also saw both the heavyweight and junior heavyweight titles change, as The Great Sasuke from Michinoku Pro Wrestling captured the IWGP jr. title pinning Jushin Liger. The attendance and gate trail in their respective categories only the October 9, 1995 card at the Tokyo Dome headlined by Takada vs. Keiji Muto, which drew 67,000 fans--the all-time record for any event in the Dome, and \$6.1 million, the first pro wrestling event in history to top the \$6 million barrier. It was reported to us as being a great show with every match but two being good.

With his third Tokyo Dome sellout on top over the past seven months, Takada has been the constant on top in the biggest major show run in the history of pro wrestling. Because of that, once again one must question the decision to change the title this early in the run, which presumably was made before Takada even won the title from Muto on 1/4. It was largely accepted in Japan that keeping Takada on top and running him through several new opponents in dream matches would maximize business for the remainder of this year. The decision was apparently made and kept since Takada isn't a New Japan regular performer and because of the belief Takada at any time could simply retire, as he announced he would last year. In addition, Takada's performance has been disappointing in almost every major match since he started headlining with New Japan. If the retirement were to happen, New Japan wouldn't have had one of its top wrestlers score the last win over him and get the belt back clean.

Complete show results:

1. Yuji Nagata & Tokimitsu Ishizawa upset Shinjiro Otani & Koji Kanemoto in 11:20 when Nagata pinned Kanemoto with a superplex off the top rope. This was said to have been a strong opener.
2. Riki Choshu & Takashi Iizuka & Osamu Nishimura & Satoshi Kojima beat Shiro Koshinaka & Kuniaki Kobayashi & Tatsutoshi Goto & Akira Nogami in 11:04 when Choshu pinned Nogami after a lariat.
3. Sasuke pinned Liger to win the IWGP junior heavyweight title on 19:27. This result was probably for two reasons. Most importantly, it created a reason for Sasuke to return to New Japan and gave Liger a new opponent to headline against. The other is political, as with the interpromotional match with Great Muta vs. Jinsei "Hakushi" Shinzaki of Michinoku Pro as one of the headline matches on the show and with Muta going over, this was the bone thrown the way of Michinoku Pro to let them come up even on the show. This was one of the better matches on the show, with Sasuke going in with a right knee injury and Liger working over the knee most of the way. Sasuke got the win with a power bomb and Tiger suplex for the pin.

Before the next match started, Antonio Inoki was introduced and he talked about the card in Los Angeles on 6/1, and then introduced Dan Severn as his tag team partner and announced Severn as joining New Japan. Severn mentioned he's now held 85 different championships between amateur wrestling and other sports including Ultimate Fighting, Judo, Sambo and pro wrestling and mentioned being the Ultimate Ultimate and NWA champion.

4. Randy Savage pinned Hiroyoshi Tenzan in 9:49 after two elbow drops off the top rope. This wasn't a good match as Tenzan carried it, but it was okay.
5. Masa Chono defeated Lex Luger via submission in 14:37 using the STF. Again, these two results were largely political as WCW got to split its two matches against New Japan, and Chono got his submission win back for his submission loss at Starrcade. Tenzan didn't get his win back because he's not as of yet considered a star of the caliber of Savage. This was the only bad match on the show.
6. The Road Warriors returned to Japan after many years absence as far as being a tag team, teaming with Power Warrior (Kensuke Sasaki donning the Hell Raisers gimmick) to beat Rick & Scott Steiner & Scott Norton in 15:17 when Animal pinned Rick after the Road Warriors used their double impact finish on him. This was said to have been a great match. Animal got one of the biggest pops of the entire show in his return to the ring in Japan after four plus years
7. Muta pinned Shinzaki in 19:44 using the moonsault after blowing mist in Shinzaki's face. This was reported to be easily the best match on the show. Shinzaki juiced heavy and apparently pulled out every move in the back in attempting to score what would have been an incredible upset.
8. Genichiro Tenryu pinned Tatsumi Fujinami in 9:16 after a clothesline. During the match, Fujinami legitimately had his nose broken and blood was spurting everywhere for the entire match. This was said to have been a surprisingly good match, one of the two or three best on the show/
9. Hashimoto defeated Takada in 12:33 with a cross armbreaker submission after a DDT. Both men got near submissions and rope breaks with the cross armbreaker earlier in the match, and traded the super stiff kicks. Hashimoto got the biggest pop of the show winning the title back for New Japan. Most fans thought it was the best match on the card because of the finish and title change, but I was told it wasn't as good as it sounds on paper.

JANUARY 4, 1997

New Japan's annual major event of the year, "`97 Wrestling World in Tokyo Dome" drew 52,500 fans.

This would have to be considered the biggest crowd in the history of wrestling where the primary draw on the card was tradition rather than the matches themselves because everyone was complaining ahead of time about the poor line-up.

It was said to have been a good show, better than it looked to be on paper, but not at the level of the major shows in the past.

1. Junji Hirata & Osamu Nishimura & Satoshi Kojima & Manabu Nakanishi beat Kazuo Yamazaki & Osamu Kido & Takashi Iizuka & Yuji Nagata in 11:21 when Hirata pinned Nagata after a clothesline. There wasn't much heat because the Dome is the worst place in the world to watch wrestling and it takes the crowd a while to get into the atmosphere of watching the screen so the first match is traditionally dead. Anyway, the work itself was very good. ***

2. Super Liger (Chris Jericho in a silver Liger outfit who will be programmed as a regular in New Japan this year and as Liger's alter ego rival similar to the Santo Negro angle in AAA a few years back) debuted pinning Koji Kanemoto in 11:11 with a dragon suplex.

Current note: This was one of Jericho's most legendary disasters of his career. He was brought to New Japan to become the new big rival of Jushin Liger. But this match was so bad, which Jericho readily admits to it being a choke in what was by far the biggest stage of his career, that Super Liger was dropped and Jericho and Liger never had that program.

3. Jinsei Shinzaki (Hakushi) pinned Michiyoshi Ohara in 9:17 after a diving head-butt and power bomb. Great Sasuke was in Shinzaki's corner for the match. Just before the finish, Akitoshi Saito tried to interfere but Shinzaki ducked and his spin kick instead hit Ohara. Decent. *3/4

4. In the first of the series of New Japan vs. Big Japan matches, Shinjiro Otani pinned Big Japan's Yoshihiro Tajiri in 8:30 with a springboard spin kick. Tajiri is the one Big Japan wrestler who looked really good. The only negative is this match was kept too short because the wrestling was excellent. Highlights were Tajiri using an Asai-moonsault and a rolling cradle using his legs instead of his arms. Otani is the best junior heavyweight worker in the world today. ***1/2

Current note: Yoshihiro Tajiri was an unknown at this time, who would go on to be one of the signature stars of ECW.

5. Kendo Nagasaki pinned Tatsutoshi Goto after a piledriver on a chair. Goto did the single worst windsprint (more like slow jog) clothesline ever. Nagasaki swung a mean chair which busted up Goto hardway, but the match was awful. I'm surprised how bad Nagasaki has gotten. DUD

Current note: This Kendo Nagasaki was not the U.K. legend, but Kazuo Sakurada, who worked in the U.S. and Japan with the name, having taken the name from the U.K. star.

6. Masahiro Chono beat Shoji Nakamaki in 1:07. This was a total destruction by Chono who came out to a huge reaction. He attacked Nakamaki in the aisle and destroyed him. Nakamaki juiced within the first 15 seconds. Chono climbed to the top rope and invited Nakamaki to superplex him, which Nakamaki did, and Chono laughed it off and bounced up and hit him with a Yakuza kick for the pin. Chono continued destroying him after the match and put him in the STF. Hiro Saito hit the ring and Chono held Nakamaki down while Saito gave him three sentons. Chono then whipped Nakamaki into the barbed wire board that he had brought into the ring. This was the ultimate in the New Japan destruction of a top star from a smaller office to clearly show that Nakamaki wasn't even in Chono's league. *

7. Masa Saito beat Shinya Kojika in 4:25 with a standing heel hold. Kojika, the President of Big Japan Pro Wrestling, came out in a tux. Saito physically looks absolutely incredible for 54 years old. He basically played monster powerhouse as he not only handled Kojika, but also continually beat up the three Big Japan wrestlers that were at ringside. Kojika's only offense consisted of one comedy spot where he choked Saito with a chain until referee Kotetsu

Yamamoto (who is in the same age bracket as Saito and Kojika) attacked Kojika to break the hold and Saito went right to the finish. After the match Saito destroyed the three other guys at ringside. -*

Current note: This match was awful. Kojika still wrestles on occasion toady.

8. Antonio Inoki beat Willie Williams in 4:23. Satoru Sayama was in Inoki's corner for the match. Inoki used the octopus, then dropped to the mat with Williams, who tapped out. Awful. -* This was a rematch of their famous inconclusive mixed martial arts match in 1980, Antonio Inoki (who turns 54 in a few weeks) and Williams is 48.

9. Jushin Liger pinned Ultimo Dragon in 18:21 to win the J Crown. Dragon had models come out with the eight belts. The WCW belt wasn't brought to the ring nor was it ever mentioned in the commentary. Dragon was really good here but Liger was below his usual standard. It should be noted that this is the type of a match that generally doesn't play as well in the Dome as in a smaller building. Liger did a plancha. Dragon did two dives in a row, first he teased a dive, then flipped back into the ring, but then hit the dive. The second was a flip dive off the top rope to the floor. The two traded near falls back-and-forth from that point on and what was laid out was excellent but the execution was just slightly off in a few instances by Liger. Liger finally scored the pin with the SSD, which is basically a Scott Steiner-like suplex dropped into a piledriver. Liger captured the J Crown eight belts. ***3/4

Current note: In two Tokyo Dome matches, each guy had an off night and they never delivered at the Dome at the level they did in other matches.

10. Tatsumi Fujinami & Kengo Kimura, who were the first-ever IWGP tag team champions having won the belts in 1985, won them for the fourth time beating Chono & Hiroyoshi Tenzan in 16:10 when Fujinami made Chono submit to the dragon sleeper. Before the match started they aired a clip of Fujinami & Kimura's biggest win ever as a team in the finals of the 1985 tag team tournament beating Antonio Inoki & Seiji Sakaguchi. Kimura took off his regular Heisei Ishingun ring costume and instead went back to the black trunks and boots. Chono & Tenzan did a great job carrying it to a good match. After Tenzan came off the top and accidentally hit Chono with a head-butt, Kimura used his leg lariat on Chono, Fujinami used a back suplex and got the submission with the dragon sleeper. **3/4;

Current note: This was a unique generational battle. Fujinami & Kimura were a great team in the 80s. Chono & Tenzan would go on to become New Japan's legendary team over the next several years.

11. Power Warrior pinned Great Muta in 16:09. Both had really hot ring introductions. Muta piledrove Power onto a table and buried him under chairs and tables. He did the trademark windsprint clothesline on the ramp that he's been doing at every Tokyo Dome show for the past several years. Later Muta clocked Power with a chair shot, but Power didn't sell it at all and came back with a lariat. He grabbed the chair and Muta went to blow the mist, but Power blocked the mist with the chair and then clocked Muta with the chair. Power used a power bomb and as he covered Muta, Muta from underneath blew the mist in his eyes. Muta came

back and used a moonsault for a near fall. Muta brought in a table and whipped Power into it, then did the handspring elbow into the table. Muta used a Frankensteiner off the top rope flipping Power onto the table. Then he went for the moonsault but Power moved and Muta crashed on the table. Power then hit the Northern Lights bomb on the table for the pin. Muta did a good job carrying the match although he didn't do as much wrestling as he does as Muto, while Power did nothing special here. ***1/4

12. Shinya Hashimoto retained the IWGP heavyweight title beating Riki Choshu in 18:04. You could tell from crowd reactions that this was the match that people came to see. It's really amazing how much mileage this promotion got out of their August match. Choshu has almost nothing left but Hashimoto is the master of drama and telling a simple but effective story in his matches. In that way it was an excellent world title match to headline the traditional major show of the year. It wasn't on the level of the August match, however, mainly because they didn't spend much time with Hashimoto selling the knee. It was a very simple match, as it pretty much has to be with these two. Hashimoto kicked the hell out of Choshu. Choshu came back and used the scorpion for a long period, immobilizing Hashimoto. With Hashimoto immobile, Choshu hit three lariats for a near fall. He then hit three more for another near fall. And then hit a third set of three for another near fall. As he went for his 10th lariat, Hashimoto made the comeback with the brutal chops and kicks. As he went to the top, Choshu gave him a superplex while standing on the top rope but the spot was made silly since ref Masao Hattori had to hold Choshu's butt to keep his balance while executing the move. Choshu hit two more lariats for near falls before Hashimoto made his comeback using the brutal kicks once again. Hashimoto tried a DDT and a implant DDT but both times Choshu kicked out, before finally hitting the brainbuster for the pin. Even though the match was amazingly simple, it was still the best match on the show. ****

Most of the show aired on 1/5 on TV-Asahi in a two-hour special from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. which drew an 11.3 rating and a 17.3 peak rating for the Choshu-Hashimoto main event. The rating was considered a major success because it was a better number than for the Takada matches with Muto and Hashimoto and I believe those specials were in prime time when the audience watching television is quite a bit larger than on a Sunday afternoon.

JANUARY 4, 1998

The final matches of the career of Riki Choshu and the retirement announcement by Antonio Inoki drew a sellout 55,000 fans for New Japan's traditional 1/4 show at the Tokyo Dome.

The show, which sold out well ahead of time, was described as a decent but not great show, featuring several upsets and headlined by Choshu's protégé, Kensuke Sasaki retaining the IWGP heavyweight title pinning Keiji Muto in 25:18.

It was the second largest crowd in the history of pro wrestling in Japan, behind only the Keiji Muto vs. Nobuhiko Takada match in 1995 and being equal to the Takada vs. Shinya Hashimoto match in 1996. With tickets scaled higher than any New Japan Dome show in history except the Muto-Takada match, it was likely, at least when it comes to yen, the second biggest gate in the

history of pro wrestling anywhere in the world.

As reported in a front page newspaper story on 12/27, Inoki did announce his retirement with his final match on 4/4 at the Tokyo Dome. *Nikkan Sports* in its headline story on the morning of the card started publicizing Inoki's next angle, which is creating his own NWO type organization within New Japan (and actually the NWO angle was originated with New Japan 15 years ago with Choshu's Ishingun group feuding with Seikigun for the New Japan office) called the World Martial Arts Organization.

As was reported here months ago, Inoki's idea is to form a group of "shooters" to feud with New Japan, using Yoshiaki Fujiwara, Satoru Sayama, perhaps Naoya Ogawa or even Nobuhiko Takada.

The belief within wrestling is that Inoki will retire as a wrestler but perhaps make comebacks as a martial artist and that even at the age of 55, this won't be his final match. In Inoki's farewell speech, he said that martial arts have become very popular, and even mentioned the name of Rickson Gracie as helping to popularize it. He talked about wanting to promote martial arts shows in China, Europe, the United States and India and said that he wanted the fans to decide who his final opponent would be. He did bring up the name Hulk Hogan as a potential final opponent although that would probably be based on Hogan's willingness to put Inoki over, which Hogan may be more willing to do now than in years past.

That brings up the question of WCW timing because WCW probably wouldn't want its world champion, if Hogan were to have the title in April, do a job in another organization even though today that means less than ever before.

To show how little it means today, WCW had its cruiserweight champion, Ultimo Dragon, lost to New Japan's IWGP junior heavyweight champion, Shinjiro Otani, in the best match on the Dome show.

To WCW, it was more important to have multiple title changes on the Nitro in Baltimore coming off the poor show the previous week, full well knowing the result would be its champion was going to Japan and putting over their champion a few days later.

There was also a final ceremony for Choshu, 46, who wrestled five very short matches, winning four of them. Choshu received presents and flowers from his three children, from magazines and newspapers and from long-time wrestling rivals Tatsumi Fujinami and Seiji Sakaguchi along with Sasaki and they rang the bell ten times to commemorate the end of his 24-and-a-half year pro career.

Current note: Of course, Choshu came out of retirement, and continued to wrestle before finally retiring in 2019, Inoki, who nobody believed would really retire, did, although he did a few New Year's Eve exhibition type matches with Tatsumi Fujinami and Renzo Gracie during the MMA era.

1. Kendo Ka Shin (Tokimitsu Ishizawa) beat Koji Kanemoto in 12:01 with a flying armbar off the top rope. The finish was said to have been spectacular. Kanemoto may have injured his knee

during the match which was said to have been good.

2. Shinjiro Otani pinned Ultimo Dragon in 17:06 to retain the IWGP jr. title. A domed stadium is the worst place to work a match of this style but this turned into an excellent match largely built around a series of reversals of La Magistral, Dragon's hot finishing cradle. They used all kinds of big moves and near falls, peaking when Dragon got near falls finally getting La Magistral, and another with his spinning huracanrana off the top rope. Finish saw Dragon once again go for La Magistral, but this time Otani quickly reversed the move into a german suplex, and then hit the dragon suplex for the finish. Best match on the show.

***1/4

3. Yuji Nagata upset Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Kwang Kil Choi) in 11:33 using the Nagata lock for the submission after Tenzan missed a head-butt off the top rope and Nagata hit him with two enzuigiris. This was a one-shot deal for Nagata, but in beating Tenzan, it's supposed to signal to Japanese fans that when he returns full-time (scheduled to be this summer) that he'll now be a top star. Match itself was said to have been disappointing.

4. Tatsumi Fujinami & Osamu Nishimura beat Satoshi Kojima & Manabu Nakanishi in 12:39 when Nishimura pinned Kojima using a Northern Lights suplex. The story in this match was the same as the previous bout, trying to get over that Nishimura is now a star scoring a pin on Kojima, who is one of New Japan's hottest young wrestlers. Nishimura came to the ring wearing an NWO t-shirt, but during the match they didn't tease any problems between him and Fujinami. Nishimura, who is being groomed for an IWGP heavyweight title match in February in Sapporo, didn't get over even though he's being given the push and it was said to have been a bad match. After the match, Fujinami issued a challenge to Jumbo Tsuruta. I think we're a few years late on that match.

5. Riki Choshu had his final five matches of his career. This whole deal was a dud, as Choshu didn't take any bumps for his foes, who mainly punched and kicked him for about a minute or two before Choshu came back with one lariat and/or scorpion for the win. The best part of the whole deal was actually seeing Choshu almost in tears backstage just as he was about to go on, and the monstrous crowd reaction for a teary-eyed Choshu just as his trademark entrance music "Power Hall" began playing. Since Choshu has had the same entrance music for close to 20 years, the last 15 of which he's been a headliner working in both major promotions, the "Power Hall" theme for Choshu is probably one of the two or three most immediately recognizable entrance music pieces for any wrestler in history. Kazuyuki Fujita, who has looked good in his previous TV matches, had no chance to show anything. Yutaka Yoshie, who is built along the lines of a younger Shinya Hashimoto (you know, fat) seemed to move like a good athlete but also showed nothing. Tatsuhito Takaiwa, who is a good worker, showed nothing. Takashi Iizuka beat Choshu with a cool finisher, reversing the scorpion into an achilles heel hook, although the finish was the only thing good about the match. Jushin Liger tried in his match, but Choshu had nothing left, although he did do a rather sloppy pescado (known in Japan as a plancha) before winning after two lariats. The crowd pop was thunderous when he came out, but the whole building recognized after his winning just how disappointing the whole

five match deal was. It was like the guy wrestled one show too many before he was done.

5. Choshu (Mitsuo Yoshida) pinned Kazuyuki Fujita in 3:57 after a back suplex and a lariat.

6. Choshu pinned Yutaka Yoshie in 1:42 after a lariat.

7. Choshu pinned Tatsuhito Takaiwa in 1:21 using a lariat and using the scorpion deathlock for the submission. It was a real waste for Takaiwa to do such a short match and he didn't do any of his trademark moves.

8. Takashi Iizuka (Takayuki Iizuka) made Choshu submit to the akirasengatame (heel hook) in 2:02 upon reversing the scorpion. After the match Iizuka said that he was happy to beat Choshu but said that it was because Choshu was tired.

9. Choshu pinned Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) in 5:09 of the final match of his career. Liger jumped Choshu early using a koppo kick and a Northern Lights bomb. Liger also used a superplex off the top for a near fall. Choshu actually delivered a plancha, his first one of those in years. In the ring, Liger used a dragon screw and figure four, but Choshu escaped. Choshu hit the lariat for a near fall and got a pin with the second lariat.

10. Don Frye beat Naoya Ogawa in 8:47 using the choke after a low blow. These two worked out a pretty decent match in Minnesota. Ogawa looked much better than he had in recent matches, and threw some really great judo takedowns that Frye sold well. Frye took good bumps, but the match still fell within the realm of realistic which it needed to be. Both guys really didn't know how to sell, but in a match like this, if they sold like pro wrestlers it would ruin the aura to begin with. This shows how much New Japan is happy with Frye, since the original plan was if everything went perfect, Frye would be pushed until the Dome show where he'd put Ogawa over. Now Frye's first big job looks to be when he and Ogawa are rematched on the 2/15 Budokan Hall main event. Frye was heavily booed coming out, managed by Brad Rheingans, and holding his two title belts from winning the UFC tournament and the Ultimate Ultimate tournament. Ogawa dominated early using lots of judo whips and takedowns. Frye got a choke from behind but refused to break the hold on the ropes which caused heavy booing. Ogawa made another comeback, but Frye cut him off delivering a low blow and then putting him in a choke sleeper. With Ogawa not moving, the ref stopped the match and awarded it to Frye. After the match, Ogawa went crazy attacking the ref saying that he never submitted to the move and challenging Frye to a rematch. **

11. Shinya Hashimoto beat Dennis Lane, a no-name kickboxer who appeared on a K-1 card a few years ago. This match was a disaster. Hashimoto tackled him and Lane legitimately broke his kneecap and motioned for the match to end. He said he was injured and basically quit, which wasn't the planned finish. The crowd booed this heavily. -*

12. Masahiro Chono pinned Shiro Koshinaka in 15:05. Chono had a great ring entrance with the two baseball stars along with Hiroyoshi Tenzan and Hiro Saito coming out with him and the crowd popped big for the group. It build into a good match with them trading big moves and getting some near falls. After delivering two power bombs, Koshinaka really screwed up a third one which was the one bad part of the match. They had some nice transitions into their hqt2/27/20, 10:51 AM

moves, ending when Chono hit the Yakuza kick for the fall. ***

13. Kensuke Sasaki retained the IWGP heavyweight belt beating Keiji Muto in 25:18. Muto carried the match and worked a slow pace since they were going so long. Technically Muto was very good when it came to moves and psychology but he worked so slow and lacked aggressiveness which made the middle part of the match lacking in excitement. Muto did all his regular signature spots until being cut off by Sasaki hitting two reverse ipponzei's, the first rather sloppy. Sasaki got his power strangle on but Muto got out and began working the knee. He did a great job and the match got good from this point on, using dragon screws, dropkicks to the knee one after another, including off the middle ropes until putting on the figure four, which the crowd saw as the finish. Sasaki made the ropes. Muto put it on in the middle and held the hold for a while until Sasaki made a rope break. Muto used a moonsault but Sasaki kicked out. After a dropkick off the top, Muto went for a Frankensteiner off the top but Sasaki caught him in mid-air and dropped him down into a power bomb. Sasaki tried a Northern Lights bomb but his knee gave out. It was a false tease and he then "gutted it out" and tried the move and executed it for a near fall, then did it again and got the pin. ***1/2

APRIL 4, 1998

Notes: Since Rikidozan died of an infection after being stabbed, and Giant Baba also died without ever having retired, there were bigger matches, but there could be no bigger show in Japanese pro wrestling history than the retirement of Antonio Inoki. Because Rikidozan died so long ago, Inoki is now the best remembered pro wrestler in Japan. The last time there was a poll of the biggest name in Japanese history, of course Inoki won. The last time there was a national poll of the biggest sports stars in Japanese history, Inoki was No. 7. His farewell was the first \$7 million gate in pro wrestling history, a record that stood until 2009, and that no event other than recent WrestleManias has ever even come close to. So there's a funny story about Inoki's final match. Inoki chose his farewell to be against Don Frye, a former star from UFC who had become the top foreigner in New Japan. Inoki pushed the idea of realism. That's why he lost in the first New Japan main event to Karl Gotch. That's why his most famous matches were against non-pro wrestlers like Muhammad Ali and Wilhelm Ruska, or shooters like Billy Robinson. So the plan was to go out, at 55 years old, losing to someone real. Had Frye beaten Inoki in his final match, Frye would have been cemented as a legend for life. But it didn't happen. At some point Inoki decided it was best to win. Inoki and Frye laid out a 15:00 match. Inoki was long past his prime, and while Frye's unique style got over in Japan, he was not a guy who would be thought could carry Inoki. But in the end, it all fell apart. Frye accidentally broke Inoki's ribs early and they had no choice but to go home. It was a memorable record setting night, but not a memorable main event.

Old wrestling superstars have emotional ceremonies to major fanfare for retirements like the superstars in real sports. They may have those farewells, but they always come back, either living off their fading names until they disappear to no fanfare long after all but their most loyal fans wouldn't care any longer. Or many years after their big retirement, they have their final match in an unknown town to little fanfare and just do a slow fade from the scene and are never

heard about again.

Some wrestlers were actually sincere in their original retirements, but got talked out of it for business reasons, some probably wishing they hadn't been. Some were retired by their companies for political reasons, and when politics changed, they came back. But for most, the retirements were another wrestling con designed to draw money for their companies, and in some cases, attention to themselves, with plans already on the table for how to bring them back while counting on wrestling fans' short-term memories. Some, like Verne Gagne, came back so many times that it was considered a bad joke. Others, like Dynamite Kid, were so badly banged up from wrestling wars that they retired at a young age, and whatever comebacks there were due to injuries were so sad that most fans have erased them from their memories. Perhaps Roddy Piper really believed he was walking away on top to go into the movies and would never need to return, only to return 1,000 times. Others probably retired specifically to set up eventual coming out of retirement angles. With every name there is probably a different story and a different reason.

Which brings us to the biggest retirement party of all-time, on 4/4 at the Tokyo Dome for Antonio Inoki. With the possible exception of Andre the Giant and Hulk Hogan, Inoki was arguably the biggest wrestling star of the generation, maybe bigger if only because he spanned many different generations. Without question he was the most influential wrestler of the modern era. His career as an active wrestler theoretically came to an end before a crowd that was announced as an all-time record for any event in the Tokyo Dome of 70,000 fans (probably closer to 57,000 to 60,000) paying approximately \$7 million and approximately \$2.6 million in merchandise (including sales of 30,000 programs at \$20; which may have also set another all-time pro wrestling record of \$37.14 per head in merchandise) and combined with the television rights would put the one day figure well in excess of \$10 million.

The show broke the Japanese records set for the Keiji Muto vs. Nobuhiko Takada Tokyo Dome match on October 9, 1995 of 57,000 tickets and all-time pro wrestling records of a \$6.1 million live gate and \$2 million in merchandise.

The other big star of the show was Muhammad Ali. The world's most famous athlete during his time and perhaps of all time. The man who 22 years earlier had a horrible, yet legitimate match against Inoki, that as memories have faded, has been romanticized into being legendary and in hindsight was of incredible historical importance. Ali, on the stage at the ring entrance, lit a symbolic torch and handed it to Inoki, as he ran to the ring, symbolizing the Ali Olympic torch ceremony for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, for his "final" match of his 38 year-career against former UFC star Don "The Predator" Frye.

Just 4:09 later, in a fitting end for Inoki's career, Frye lost to the cobra twist. It was the same move that a generation of Japanese who grew up in the 60s, many of whom returned as pro wrestling fans just for this night and packed the Dome and likely a huge audience on television two nights later, had witnessed Inoki using to beat the baddest pro wrestlers of that era and so many other eras that all put together it seemed like an eternity. In doing so, he achieved a level of popularity that few athletes in the world on any level have ever achieved, and even fewer

having never actually legitimately won at a high level of competitive sports.

Ali was the biggest name invited to "The Inoki final" and the one that got the event in USA Today and on CNN. Among others introduced at the show, most of whom were involved in the ceremony after the main event which included a ten bell salute to Inoki's career, were Michiaki Yoshimura, Inoki's tag team partner in the late 60s as All Asian tag team champions; Kokichi Endo, one of the pioneers of Japanese wrestling who was Rikidozan's tag team partner in 1956 when they won a version of the World tag team titles from the Sharpe Brothers; Killer Khan, a huge former sumo wrestler named Masashi Ozawa who was billed as a Mongolian giant in pro wrestling and best known for a feud in the early 80s in both the United States and Japan with Andre the Giant; Bob Backlund, the three-time WWF champion who had famous matches both learning with and facing Inoki; Jeff Blatnick, the 1984 Olympic gold medal winning super-heavyweight Greco-roman wrestler best known by pro wrestling fans now as the announcer for the UFC; Eric Bischoff; Willem Ruska, the two-time Olympic gold medalist in judo who was the first world champion from another fighting art to put Inoki over; along with Japanese wrestling superstars Animal Hamaguchi, Genichiro Tenryu, Akira Maeda, Tatsumi Fujinami, Riki Choshu and Seiji Sakaguchi.

Results from the 4/4 Tokyo Dome show:

1. Naoya Ogawa, three-time world judo champion, defeated former UFC competitor Brian Johnston with an armbar in 3:59 in the first semifinal of the tournament with the winner getting the match against Inoki as the main event on the show.
2. Don Frye beat Igor Meindert, a 6-8, 285 pound Russian former amateur wrestling champion when the ref stopped the match as Frye was pounding on him from the mount position in 3:57. Frye continued to play heel during this match including attacking Meindert before the bell.
3. Manabu Nakanishi & Satoshi Kojima beat Hiro Saito (Hiroyuki Saito) & Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Kwang Kil Choi) in 12:04 when Nakanishi made Saito submit to a backbreaker over the shoulder (similar to the move Bruno Sammartino used in the 60s and John Studd in the 80s). Nakanishi & Kojima teased a break-up spot during the match when they tried a sandwich lariat on Saito, who moved, and the hit each other.
4. Shiro Koshinaka & Tatsutoshi Goto & Michiyoshi Ohara beat Tadao Yasuda & Kazuo Yamazaki & Junji Hirata in 9:26 when Yasuda was given a triple-team power bomb off the ropes and Koshinaka then pinned him after a flying butt bump.
5. Tatsuhito Takaiwa pinned Koji Kanemoto in 17:05. Takaiwa, winning the highest profile match of his career, used his trademark triple power bomb spot, with the third bomb dropping Kanemoto's head on the top turnbuckle. Takaiwa then used the death valley bomb while standing on the middle ropes to get the pin in what was reported as the best match on the show.
6. Shinjiro Otani pinned Yuji Yasuraoka, formerly of the WAR promotion, after a springboard spin kick and a dragon suplex. 7. In the match to decide Inoki's opponent, Frye beat Ogawa in 5:00. Frye was again punching from the mount when Satoru Sayama threw in the towel. Frye continued to attack Ogawa after the bell which wound up with Sayama doing a run-in and

attacking both Frye and Johnston in a wild post-match scene.

8. Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) retained the IWGP jr. heavyweight title beating Kendo Ka Shin (Tokimitsu Ishizawa) in 19:20 after a super fisherman buster. Said to be a typically good Liger match.

9. Keiji Muto & Masahiro Chono surprisingly retained the IWGP tag team titles beating Osamu Nishimura & Shinya Hashimoto in 18:23. The stipulations of the match were that if Muto & Chono lost, they would have to leave the NWO, but if Nishimura & Hashimoto lost, then Nishimura would have to join the NWO. Although on paper one would figure Nishimura to do the job here, because Muto is undergoing knee surgery next week, the feeling was they needed to switch the tag belts before the surgery. The story of the match was Nishimura getting all kind of near falls on Muto and it was said to have been among the best matches on the show. Nishimura got near falls using a German suplex, Northern lights suplex and another German suplex. Muto came back with a Frankensteiner and tagged in Chono. Chono hit Nishimura with three Yakuza kicks. However Nishimura caught Chono in a sleeper, but then Chono used a low backwards kick and clamped on a chicken wing crossface submission and the referee stopped the match. Chono and Nishimura shook hands after the match but in the dressing room after the match Chono said about Nishimura joining NWO that he didn't need any new members of the NWO.

10. Tatsumi Fujinami captured the IWGP heavyweight championship for a record-setting fifth time pinning Kensuke Sasaki in 21:18 with a German suplex. While Fujinami doesn't mean much today, this match worked on the show because of the story since fans from the 70s and 80s remember Fujinami working the semifinal to Inoki's main events and the fans who came to this show to relive nostalgia wanted to see the "old" Fujinami. It was a slow building match with Fujinami working the arm. Finish saw Sasaki make a comeback building to him Northern lights bomb finish, but Fujinami escaped the move and hit two enzuigiris. Sasaki came back and went for a clothesline, but Fujinami sidestepped and hit another enzuigiri before the winning German suplex.

11. Inoki beat Frye in 4:09. It was said to have been an acceptable believable looking match that worked on the show but probably wouldn't have at another place in another time. The two traded heel hooks early. Frye again got the mount and began pounding like he did in his earlier matches, but Inoki reversed him and started throwing punches down. Inoki hit the enzuigiri, threw a punch to the forehead and clamped on the cobra twist, which was his winning maneuver in the 60s, for the Submission.

JANUARY 4, 1999

Keiji Muto captured the IWGP title from Scott Norton in the main event of the 1/4 Tokyo Dome, which drew 52,500 fans and an estimated \$5.3 million, as they had a monstrous walk-up.

It was a really strange show. Based on what I've been told, it's probably better to watch a tape of the Shinya Hashimoto vs. Naoya Ogawa match than discuss it at length but that stole the show, and by no means because it was anywhere close to the best match.

1. Manabu Nakanishi beat Kazuyuki Fujita with a torture rack in 11:10.
2. Tadao Yasuda & Osamu Kido & Tatsumi Fujinami beat Michiyoshi Ohara & Tatsutoshi Goto & Kengo Kimura when Yasuda pinned Goto with a Liger bomb in 9:17.
3. Kendo Ka Shin & Dr. Wagner Jr. won the IWGP jr. tag title from Tatsuhito Takaiwa & Shinjiro Otani in 16:53 when Ka Shin did a flying armbar on Otani for the submission. Said to be real good.
4. Jushin Liger retained the IWGP jr. title pinning Koji Kanemoto in 23:11 after a brainbuster off the top rope. Said to be as good as you'd expect from these two.
5. Kensuke Sasaki beat Atsushi Onita via DQ in 5:55 when Onita threw fire in Sasaki's face. It was a bad match, but there will be more to write about this from a political standpoint. Onita got a reasonable reaction but was said to have been embarrassingly bad. There is a good chance they'll do an explosive barbed wire match between the two on 4/10 at the Dome.
6. In the first of the three bout New Japan vs. UFO feud, Yuji Nagata beat Dave Beneteau in 5:30 with a triangle choke. Nagata looked good but fans weren't really into this.
7. Don Frye, representing UFO, evened it up beating Brian Johnston in 7:55 with a lot of UFO interference. Said to be a lot better than you'd think.
8. In the deciding match, Hashimoto went to a no contest with Ogawa in 6:58. This is the match I need to see a tape of. It was described to me as being a completely different Ogawa from ever before and it appeared to be a shoot from the opening bell. Ogawa beat the hell out of Hashimoto and looked great in a Vale Tudo way in doing so, although Hashimoto was given credit for taking the punishment and getting a broken nose and not quitting. Hashimoto tried to kick ref Masao Hattori to get a DQ to stop it since it wasn't the finish, and who knows what was, he didn't. The match ended for no reason as the bell just rang and things were out of control. A lot of the post-match was edited off TV. Booker Riki Choshu got in the ring, acting as the guy running the company. Fans reacted with a huge pop as if he was going to be part of an angle. He told Ogawa to get out of the ring, which he did, but he came back and Choshu ended up punching Ogawa in the face which may be an angle for 4/10. Antonio Inoki was nowhere to be seen (actually he was in the first base dugout wearing a rubber Halloween mask watching although that at this point hasn't been acknowledged.) Remember Inoki is the master of shoot angles. There was a huge brawl at the end at Kazunari Murakami, one of Ogawa's seconds, wound up taken out on a stretcher after being punched in the nose by Ohara and was said to have suffered a broken nose.
9. Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan beat Genichiro Tenryu & Shiro Koshinaka to win the IWGP tag titles when Kojima hit Koshinaka with a lariat and Tenzan pinned him after a headbutt off the top in 16:35. First half saw Kojima & Tenzan argue, but as the match progressed, they started working together and doing double-team moves. After the previous match, the fans were having a hard time getting back into good pro wrestling "as usual." When the match ended, Kojima & Tenzan, who were warming up and didn't see what happened before, when the press came, were a lot more interested in asking about exactly what happened then talking

about their world tag team title win.

10. Muto beat Norton in 19:01 with the figure four. Muto had his working shoes and moved better and with less pain than he has in months, but after everything that had happened on the show, going so long with Norton doing an American style working the knee match didn't get over.

APRIL 10, 1999

Paced by a surprising walk-up which we're told was largely late curiosity over seeing Masahiro Chono competing in an explosive barbed wire match, a match which turned out to be a huge disappointment, the 4/10 Tokyo Dome show ended up drawing the ninth largest crowd in the history of Japanese wrestling.

Chono had done a lot of good P.R. work in the weeks leading to his match with Atsushi Onita, going to the United States and claiming that NASA had designed a ring costume to wear (you know, because NASA astronauts are worried about explosive barbed wire when they sent guys out in space), that he would be coming to the ring in a tank, and probably most important, that he claimed he would not allow this match to air on television as all major pro wrestling matches these days do.

The match did air on television later that night and the match itself drew an amazing 9.9 rating airing at approximately 1:40 a.m. later that evening. The one hour show itself drew a 6.1 rating which would be roughly a 50 share in that time slot.

This resulted in a legitimate full house of 53,000 fans, but it was significantly papered due to the weak advance. The full house was still considered impressive because the show was held during a rainstorm and that meant virtually everyone with free tickets showed up anyway (usually when a house is papered, a large percentage of those given tickets wind up not attending). The Antonio Inoki era in New Japan is clearly over, and Shinya Hashimoto, who has headlined more big gates than any wrestler in history, was not on the show leaving it from a drawing standpoint a two match show.

The reports we have indicate it was considered a good but not great show but fans didn't consider the line-up a Dome quality show. The two matches that drew were Onita vs. Chono, with a disappointing non-ending as both men were blown up twice and couldn't continue, and Keiji Muto vs. Don Frye. There was a story line in that Chono probably could have won but he showed mercy on Onita.

The other was the strong finish seeing the UFC star Frye tap out to an armbar from IWGP heavyweight champion Muto. This was said to be a hot match. The main event exemplified the typical New Japan booking pattern of using people who have made legit reputations elsewhere and having them put New Japan guys over to continue the illusion of New Japan having the superior fighting athletes. Earlier in the show, Alexander Otsuka tapped out in an interpromotional tag team to New Japan's Kazuo Yamazaki. After the Muto-Frye match was over, Chono, who was at ringside doing television commentary, went into the ring with Frye and they left together, teasing the idea of Chono & Frye forming a heel unit within New Japan.

1. Chono and Onita went to a double knockout in 16:10 in a no rope explosive barbed wire match. The first three minutes were supposed to be done to where the explosives weren't turned on. Onita came to the ring doing the Sandman gimmick smoking a cigarette and was pelted with a ton of garbage which is so unlike Japanese fans it isn't even funny. Chono came out in a tank smoking a cigar. They punched, kicked and traded chair shots for the first three minutes before the second bell rang indicating the explosive portion of the match was beginning. Onita tried to throw Chono into the barbed wire but he blocked it. After trading chair shots, Chono got mad and threw the chair at the ropes causing the first explosion but only the chair felt the damage. Eventually Onita was able to throw Chono into the barbed wire and the explosives went off. Chono threw Onita into the barbed wire. The third time saw Onita, Chono and ref Unno (the referee from the WAR promotion who was viewed as a neutral referee) all hit the barbed wire for a third explosion. All three sold it as if they were dead. New Japan ref Massao Hattori hit the ring and tried to revive Unno unsuccessfully. Onita and Chono got up but Unno didn't, so Hattori took over as referee. Onita used his thunder fire power bomb while Chono came back using a back suplex. Onita juiced really heavy from the arm from the barbed wire. Eventually Onita pulled Chono into the barbed wire for another explosion on both of them and Hattori counted to ten ruling both men knocked out. Fans went nuts as the indecisive finish, which I guess now explains why this match was put on as the opener on the card, so the rest of the card would erase the memory of not being able to get a finish out of this match. Onita once again challenged Riki Choshu after the match.

2. Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Kim Kil Choi) & Satoshi Kojima beat Yuji Nagata & Manabu Nakanishi. Before the match started, Nagata threw Nakanishi out of the ring and the two didn't get along as partners. The finish saw Kojima catch Nakanishi in the new Kojima hold (a variation of a Fujiwara armbar) while Tenzan used a moonsault to pin Nagata.

3. Tatsuhiro Takaiwa pinned Minoru Tanaka of the Battlarts promotion in 14:52 using his triple bomb and death valley bomb combination finisher. This was said to have been a good match with Tanaka impressing everyone.

4. Great Sasuke (Masanori Murakawa) & Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) won the IWGP junior heavyweight tag team titles from Dr. Wagner Jr. (Manuel Gonzalez) & Kendo Ka Shin (Tokimitsu Ishizawa) in 15:55 when Liger pinned Wagner after a brainbuster from off the top rope. There are a couple of interesting political twists to this result. The first is that a holder of a New Japan title will be appearing on the All Japan Tokyo Dome show on 5/2. The other is that Sasuke & Liger will be defending their titles on an upcoming show for Michinoku Pro wrestling. This was said to be a good match.

5. Koji Kanemoto retained the IWGP junior heavyweight title pinning Shinjiro Otani in 27:03 after a dragon suplex and a moonsault. This was reported as being the best match on the show.

6. In an interpromotional shooters type battle, New Japan's Kazuo Yamazaki & Kazuyuki Fujita beat the Battlarts team of Alexander Otsuka (Takashi Otsuka) & Yuki Ishikawa in 11:27 when Yamazaki made Otsuka submit to a kneelock. Of course it was a big deal for Otsuka to tap out since he made himself into a big name in both wrestling and martial arts beating Marco Ruas in

a Vale Tudo match in the same building in October. This was said to be a good match.

7. Kensuke Sasaki & Shiro Koshinaka retained the IWGP tag team titles beating Tatsumi Fujinami & Genichiro Tenryu (Genichiro Shimade) in 17:13 when Koshinaka pinned Fujinami after a power bomb while at the same time Sasaki had Tenryu caught in the scorpion deathlock. This was reported to us as being a bad match with Fujinami & Tenryu looking very old in the ring. They looked so bad that after the match, Kotetsu Yamamoto, a former wrestler and long-time official with New Japan, basically told reporters that both men looked over the hill, which for a Japanese company member to come out and say is quite a statement.

8. Muto beat Frye with the armbar submission in 12:16 to retain the IWGP heavyweight title. This was said to be a hot match. Fans were into the match because Frye sold a lot and the fans are into every Frye match as long as he sells. Muto did the low dropkicks to the knee and dragon screws to work the leg. They traded submissions. Frye was punching away at Muto, when Muto caught the arm for the finish.

OCTOBER 11, 1999

If ever there was a sign New Japan was in trouble, it's when after all the hype beforehand, that the Shinya Hashimoto vs. Naoya Ogawa match failed to sellout the Tokyo Dome.

While on paper the crowd of 48,500 for the 10/11 show, which from live sources indicated looked like a real figure, sounds good, the show was heavily papered. When the show began at 3 p.m., with well over 15,000 empty seats in the building, people thought the show was going to be the lowest drawing New Japan Dome show in history. By about 40 minutes into the show, when the junior heavyweight title matches began, the building had come close to filling up. It was part of a three-day National Sports Day holiday weekend so being on a Monday afternoon shouldn't have affected attendance, although there were a lot of competing sporting events and a lot of people did take vacations. Part of the problem besides coming on the heels of a terrible main event on the previous big show is the same problem with RINGS. The more this looks like sport to today's audience, whether it be Japan or the U.S. as the audiences are still different, but not as different as they've been in the past, the less marketable it becomes as compared with outrageous entertainment.

Reports are that the matches themselves on the show which lasted four hours (the top matches air on 10/16 on a 90 minute TV-Asahi show) were generally good, and it was a huge improvement on the Jingu Stadium disaster on 8/28. Because there was so much publicity coming out of the first Hashimoto-Ogawa match, the match drew tremendous coverage after the fact including front page coverage in many sports sections and was also covered as a major news story on the TV-Asahi network newscasts both late Monday night and on Tuesday. Fans heavily booed the strange main event finish booked to look like a shoot and build for a rematch and thought the fact the match itself was so one-sided in Ogawa's favor again was strange, but were said to have overall liked the show a lot.

In changes made the week prior to the show, the Hashimoto-Ogawa match was moved to the main event position on the card. Tatsumi Fujinami was named referee and Antonio Inoki

introduced the match and was in the corner. However, it was Inoki who got in the ring to stop the match and rule Ogawa as the winner with Hashimoto again taking a beating in a match worked to look like a shoot. It was also announced a few days before the show that it would be an NWA world heavyweight title match and that Fujinami would ref instead of Inoki, who turned the spot down. Originally, to get over the IWGP heavyweight title, the Keiji Muto vs. Manabu Nakanishi was placed in the main event position even though clearly it was the other match which was the big draw, stemming from their 1/4 match which was literally a one-sided shoot with Hashimoto getting the short end before he hit the ref to end his misery and it was ruled no contest. Apparently, the NWA title process went something like this. At the NWA anniversary show, where Inoki was named to head international expansion, he got the necessary votes that Hashimoto could win the title. However, New Japan had no interest in the title. Inoki felt because of his position in the NWA and in grooming Ogawa for superstardom, to have Ogawa in such a huge match and have the title not be a part of it would hurt the value of the title in Japan and convinced New Japan to allow the title to be part of the match. It was announced as a title match at a press conference on 10/8, which saw an angle where Hashimoto stabbed the desk with a pen and then threw the desk at Ogawa before walking off. Fujinami slapped Hashimoto in the face just before he walked off for his insubordinate public behavior while Ogawa wanted to go after him. Given that Hashimoto has lost his two key big show singles matches to Genichiro Tenryu and Masahiro Chono since his comeback, plus gone 2-3 in the IWGP tournament and didn't reach the finals in the tag team tournament, it was figured he desperately needed the win and would get it. Those who work New Japan have noticed that Hashimoto means far less now than ever before, as his performance against Ogawa killed his "tough-guy" ref to begin with, and then in his comeback he didn't get his heat back. Apparently the decision making process for Ogawa to win stemmed from the idea that New Japan had nothing hot on the horizon for the 1/4 Dome show and felt they needed a third match. Apparently that's also why Tenryu beat Kensuke Sasaki on the show, to set up a lengthier program between the two including possibly a rematch on the next Dome.

1. Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Kim Kil Choi) pinned Tatsutoshi Goto in 10:13 after a diving head-butt. This was said to be a fair opener at best.
2. Kazuyuki Fujita beat Sean McCulley, who once fought in the World Combat Championships PPV in the U.S. and of late has worked for the UFO promotion, in 2:35 with the Shamrock ankle lock submission in a match said to be good for what it was.
3. Tatsuhito Takaiwa & Shinjiro Otani retained the IWGP jr. tag team titles beating Koji Kanemoto & Minoru Tanaka in 18:32 when Otani pinned Kanemoto after the spider bomb (spinning Liger bomb). This was said to have been the best match on the card. Tanaka looked great with all his transition spots into armbars and near submissions.
4. Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) captured the IWGP jr. title for the record-breaking 10th time pinning Kendo Ka Shin (Tokimitsu Ishizawa) in 16:08 after a brainbuster. This was said to have been a very good match as well.
5. Tatsumi Fujinami & Shiro Koshinaka beat Takashi Iizuka (Takayuki Iizuka) & Osamu Kido in

9:31 when Koshinaka pinned Iizuka after a power bomb. When these guys came out after Liger had just wrestled, fans considered this as intermission and fans left for the concession stand. No heat and not much of a match. Even in Japan, where there is more of a tradition of respecting legends from the past, fans aren't into seeing the older wrestlers in slower old-style matches anymore.

6. Kimo (Kimo Leopoldo) made his New Japan debut beating Yuji Nagata in 3:54 with a choke. They worked the match to look like a UFC fight so it was good for what it was since Nagata is probably the best wrestler in the company at carrying a green guy in this kind of a match. It should make Kimo into something of a foreign star since Nagata has credibility.

7. Don Frye & Masahiro Chono beat Satoshi Kojima & Scott Norton in 17:01 when Chono made Kojima submit to the STF. Chono, who is limited by his bad neck, really couldn't do much but punch or kick. They did a big storyline tease spot where Frye accidentally punched Chono. They are doing a slow-build to an eventual split of Team 2000. Said to be good.

8. Genichiro Tenryu (Genichiro Shimade) pinned Kensuke Sasaki in 14:49 in their first ever singles match when Tenryu used a Northern Lights bomb, which is the move created by Sasaki's wife Akira Hokuto which Sasaki later used as his own finisher (same move as Al Snow's snowplow), on Sasaki for the pin. This was said to be surprisingly good and one of the three best matches on the show.

9. Keiji Muto retained the IWGP heavyweight title beating Manabu Nakanishi in 20:00 to avenge his loss to Nakanishi in the G-1 tournament finals. Now this makes the tag team tournament final result even more baffling. Nakanishi, who people still don't take seriously as a top guy even with the G-1 win, already tapped out to Muto in the finals of the tag team tournament. Nakanishi got the torture rack on Muto on eight different occasions during the match but Muto always escaped. On the final one, Muto rolled off his shoulder and got the armbar for the submission via ref stoppage. Nakanishi looked terrible but Muto apparently did a good job of carrying things.

10. Ogawa retained the NWA heavyweight title beating Hashimoto in 13:10. It was a one-sided match with Ogawa dominating. He delivered leg kicks, got the mount position and began punching away. Fujinami as ref tried to stop Ogawa from punching, but he continued. Hashimoto came back with a flurry of punches and later delivered two back suplexes. Eventually, after taking more of a beating, Hashimoto took the gloves off his hands and began throwing bare-handed blows. Ogawa finally hit his STO (a judo whip) and began punching and kicking at will when Inoki jumped into the ring and slapped Ogawa and told him to stop because this is a sporting event and Hashimoto was down laid out on his stomach after kicks and Inoki signaled for the bell. This was done to get over it was a shoot (which it wasn't) because in the famous Andre the Giant vs. Akira Maeda match in 1986 (which wasn't a shoot either but was completely out of control by the finish), Inoki had jumped into the ring to stop it from getting out of hand. Fans booed the finish since Inoki wasn't the ref and there was no pin or submission ending in what was the most hyped match of the year. Fujinami claimed that he wanted the match to end with a clean finish and that's why he didn't stop the match. I guess it

was the finish they thought would work best for building up a third meeting. The match was said to be exciting but the finish was flat.

JANUARY 4, 2000

The mixed promotional angle, the very thing that New Japan has specialized in for nearly three decades, looks back in the forefront as representatives from WCW (J.J. Dillon and Paul Orndorff) and RINGS (Akira Maeda) along with Nobuhiko Takada all met with New Japan management in conjunction with the company's biggest show of the year 1/4 at the Tokyo Dome.

The five hour show, billed as "Tokyo Dome 2000," drew a sellout 53,500 fans. People who usually get comp tickets weren't given them so it wasn't seriously papered), was said to have been a big success and already set up several angles for Dome shows planned for both April and October. As in past years, the 1/4 date was able to sellout based on annual tradition, as there was no match with huge ticket selling impact on the show with a main event where Kensuke Sasaki was crowned IWGP heavyweight champion pinning Genichiro Tenryu.

Maeda, Takada and Atsushi Onita were all advertised to be part of the show, the former two because of the retirement of Kazuo Yamazaki, which both had long histories working with dating back to the early 80s. Onita never appeared at the show before the crowd, but did an angle outside the building where he challenged Riki Choshu (who also never appeared before the crowd during the show) to an empty arena match after the show was over and the crowd left. Finally after ten minutes, a New Japan official came out and said that it wasn't going to happen, but it is still a match they are building for one of the Dome shows later in the year.

Another match strongly hinted at was Sasaki to defend the title against Takada on the April Dome show. This was originally scheduled for 8/28 at Jingu Baseball Stadium in Tokyo but Takada bowed out and New Japan was so upset at the way he backed out that it was said the two sides would never work together. After the show, Takada was asked about the proposed match with Sasaki and he said it was 50/50 whether it would take place and he'd wrestle this year on big shows for New Japan.

In addition, Maeda, Antonio Inoki and Tatsumi Fujinami had a meeting where Maeda proposed a New Japan vs. RINGS program. Two other RINGS native stars, its world champion Kiyoshi Tamura and also Hiromitsu Kanehara (he worked with New Japan in 1995-96 in the New Japan vs. UWFI feud) were also at the show as part of the Yamazaki retirement ceremony.

The WCW influence at the show were Dillon and Orndorff as management and wrestlers Chris Benoit, Rick Steiner and Randy Savage. Benoit, wrestling as Wild Pegasus, with Dillon and Orndorff at ringside with Brad Rheingans watching; lost to Hiroyoshi Tenzan in one of the better matches on the show, but later they were building up a match with Pegasus & Jushin Liger challenging IWGP jr. tag champs Tatsuhiro Takaiwa & Shinjiro Otani for later in the year. At one point Benoit had tried to propose a match on this show where he would challenge Bret Hart for the WCW title, but WCW turned down the suggestion. Steiner pinned Savage in what was reported as the worst match on the show, although they did throw in an American comedy

spot involving TV announcer and former wrestler Masa Saito. A video of Bill Goldberg, showing a tape of him elbowing the car window from Salisbury, MD and doing an interview where he showed his 40 stitches and apologized for not being at the show but said that he would wrestle for New Japan later in the year.

1. Shinjiro Otani & Tatsuhiro Takaiwa retained the IWGP jr. tag titles beating Minoru Tanaka & Kendo Ka Shin (Tokimitsu Ishizawa) in 13:09 when Takaiwa pinned Ka Shin. Ka Shin had Takaiwa in a triangle choke armbar combination when Takaiwa powered the move into a death valley driver, hit his triple bomb and finished with a form of a piledriver for the pin. This was said to be a really good opener.

2. Shiro Koshinaka pinned Satoshi Kojima in 10:17 after a power bomb. The result is something of a surprise since Kojima's career is on the ascent as one of the company's few heavyweights with main event potential. The match was also said to be a major disappointment in that it was only fair at best from someone who really needed to strong performance on the company's traditional biggest show of the year.

3. Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Kim Kil Choi) pinned Pegasus (Chris Benoit) in 10:55 in what was said to have been a really good match. It was billed as a battle of the diving head-butts and Tenzan scored the pin using that move.

4. In a really weird match, Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) retained the IWGP jr. title pinning Koji Kanemoto in only 3:56. There is clearly a story to all this, probably some sort of a working shoot. Liger came out fast using his palms and supposedly knocked Kanemoto out with a blow. With Kanemoto knocked out, Liger went with a Liger bomb and new form of a brainbuster which started out like a Northern Lights suplex for the pin. Kanemoto went out on a stretcher and even backstage they gave the impression he'd been knocked out. The short match is very rare for a junior heavyweight title match, or for that matter any title match in New Japan, and the last time there was a short match like that was in the 1996 J Crown tournament where Ultimo Dragon pinned Liger, and a few days later it came out the reason for the short match was because Liger had a brain tumor. Kanemoto probably was injured going into the match which is why it was kept short and they did that angle to explain an injury because they went out so fast and it was so exciting early according to reports that it seemed they were going short from the start. The initial report we got was that this was considered by reporters as the best match on the show.

5. Manabu Nakanishi beat Kenzo Suzuki in 6:41 using the torture rack. Suzuki is a former college rugby star that Seiji Sakaguchi is trying to push as a future major star. The match told the story that Suzuki was strong, with him mainly using spears, but unskilled as pro wrestling so fans can see him develop before their eyes. Since it was Suzuki's pro debut, this wasn't a good match but it was said to have accomplished what it was supposed to have and that is have Suzuki make an impact and lose.

6. Yuji Nagata pinned Kazuo Yamazaki after two back suplexes in 6:44 in Yamazaki's retirement match. The match was said to have been good for what it was, since Yamazaki clearly isn't in

good condition due to injuries that caused him to retire at the age of 37. After the match they held a retirement ceremony with Fujinami, Sakaguchi, Maeda, Takada, Tamura and Kanehara in the ring. It was surprising that Choshu wasn't part of the ceremony.

7. Kimo (Kimo Leopoldo) beat Kazuyuki Fujita via DQ in 4:01 when Fujita delivered a knee to the groin and the match was stopped. As you can imagine, fans hated this finish and it ruined the match.

8. Scott Norton pinned Don Frye in 8:50 after a power bomb. A lot of this match was brawling outside the ring. The match was said to have been really sloppy but had a lot of heat.

9. Rick Steiner (Robert Rechsteiner) pinned Randy Savage (Randy Poffo) in 11:08 after a bulldog off the top rope. It was said that Savage made a really great ring introduction but that was the highlight of the match. Fans were said to have been shocked at just how far Steiner had declined as far as ability and speed in the ring since he was formerly a regular with this promotion and it was described as like watching two old men in the ring. Savage tried to heat the crowd by constantly making motions challenging TV announcer Masa Saito. This built to a comedy spot where Steiner held Savage in a full nelson and Saito hit him.

10. Shinya Hashimoto & Takashi Iizuka (Takayuki Iizuka) beat Naoya Ogawa & Kazunari Murakami after two matches in a very heated but weird situation. It started with Murakami going crazy attacking Iizuka, taking him down and punching him from the mount and kicking him in the head "knocking Iizuka out." Hashimoto then attacked Murakami and Ogawa attacked Hashimoto and it was one of those bench clearing brawls where everyone ran in and at 2:24 it was declared a no contest. As you can imagine, the crowd was thrilled by what they thought was the ending. Antonio Inoki got in the ring and yelled at all the participants for fighting dirty and said the people wanted to see a clean wrestling match. Can you imagine the reaction that would have gotten in the States? Iizuka then woke up and "didn't even know" he'd been knocked out or that the match ended. Iizuka in the re-started match won using a choke on Murakami in 8:59 when the referee stopped the match. Match was said to have not been a great technical match but had a lot of heat. After the match, Hashimoto challenged Ogawa to a singles match and on television, Fujinami said they would try and put it together for April at the Tokyo dome.

11. Masahiro Chono beat Keiji Muto in 25:00 with a cross STF. Match was said to have been a great psychological match, mainly with Muto using figure fours and Chono using STF's. Muto still delivered his moonsault on his bad knees. Chono used his Yakuza kick and a new form of the STF called a cross STF (using a different leglock to set the move up) for the submission.

12. Sasaki pinned Tenryu (Genichiro Shimade) to capture the IWGP heavyweight title in 14:43 after two Northern Light bombs. This was mainly exchanges of punches back-and-forth but also considered to be a good match.

New Japan got huge news when the 1/4 TV rating came in at a 7.7, well up from the 6.4 last year, which is huge for a show that aired from 12:20 to 2:20 a.m. on a Tuesday night. The highest quarter hour was an amazing 11.0 for the first quarter hour (12:20 a.m. to 12:35 a.m. on

a Tuesday—think about that for a second) which was the Shinya Hashimoto & Takashi Iizuka vs. Naoya Ogawa & Kazunari Murakami match.

APRIL 7, 2000

What seemed, after the show was over, to be a huge disappointment turned out, a few days after the fact, to be a rousing success.

The 4/7 New Japan show at the Tokyo Dome, billed as "Dome Impact," drew what is believed to be the smallest crowd the promotion has ever drawn in the building. But three days later, when the TV ratings came out, the show was viewed entirely differently.

The prime time Friday night show, a nostalgia trip back to the days when New Japan pro wrestling and Antonio Inoki in the late 70s and early 80s ruled Japanese Friday night television, drew a 15.7 rating for the two hour live special that started at 7:54 p.m. and featured the final four matches on the Dome show. As soon as the rating came in so high, TV-Asahi announced that it would carry another prime time special live from the Tokyo Dome in October. The feeling from a lot of people is that it isn't New Japan pro wrestling that drew the rating but the general public had a lot of interest in the main event.

The show itself at the Tokyo Dome, headlined by Shinya Hashimoto vowing to retire if he didn't finally beat Naoya Ogawa, which he didn't and he won't, drew a crowd announced as a sellout of 60,000, which was clearly a face-saving fake number. The real number was 38,000 and even that figure was somewhat papered. It was the first time for a New Japan Dome show that the entire third base to third base outfield section tickets went unsold, and there were noticeable empty seats even in the rest of the stadium. Even before the rating came out but after the somewhat poor live gate, people were saying, and with accuracy, that most of the hype for the show was not directed toward getting fans to buy tickets to the live event (not that plenty of advertising wasn't out) but of the nostalgia aspect of New Japan being in its traditional old days time slot and having its first live prime time special since 1992.

Friday night was considered a terrible night to attempt to draw a Tokyo Dome level number of fans, because the traditional male 20s Japanese fan base usually goes out drinking after work on Friday nights, but still, most excuses like that are still largely because they didn't have a product people wanted to buy tickets to see. But it was why it was expected the television numbers would be more impressive than the live gate. The television commercials on TV-Asahi for the special highlighted Antonio Inoki, the original Tiger Mask and Hulk Hogan, three of the biggest stars during the TV popularity peak of the company so they were selling the idea of wrestling on Friday night and the glory days of New Japan wrestling on TV-Asahi more than on current matches.

Hashimoto vowing to retire if he didn't win was a far bigger draw among the general public which believed in the stipulation (although that'll probably be the last time they ever get a rating based on that) than to the ticket buying wrestling fans who have heard far too many retirement stipulations that are never adhered to over the past five years which may have resulted in lack of a ticket sales pick up after Hashimoto made the announcement three weeks

ago.

The Hashimoto vs. Ogawa match, which went on last, drew a 24.0 rating, roughly 25 million viewers, which would be the largest rating for any pro wrestling match anywhere in the world that we'd have record of since the October 9, 1986 Antonio Inoki vs. Leon Spinks match, which drew a 28.9 rating. For an American equivalent comparison, the rating was for the two-hour special was larger than for the NCAA mens basketball championship game on American television four days earlier.

The belief is that among both wrestling and non-fans, Hashimoto will be looked down upon as a liar when he makes his expected return and that his popularity will probably never fully recover, just as Terry Funk (who actually stayed out of action for 18 months in 1983-84 before returning only after shooting two major angles with Bruiser Brody & Stan Hansen) and Atsushi Onita never fully recovered from the popularity loss in Japan after their much ballyhooed retirement matches.

TV-Asahi and New Japan were only hoping for a 10.0 rating. The show did numbers equivalent to the major K-1 shows and may have established Ogawa as the mainstream star of today's Japanese pro wrestling world.

Almost immediately after the match, New Japan officials Seiji Sakaguchi and Tatsumi Fujinami talked about not wanting Hashimoto to retire and that he wrestled a great match in losing to Ogawa. There was talk of having Hashimoto become a protégé of Antonio Inoki, which was teased earlier this year and they started an angle in that direction on 4/10 with Inoki inviting him to join UFO, which Hashimoto didn't accept or reject.

Fujinami then said that Hashimoto was too young to retire. Riki Choshu has yet to say anything publicly about the retirement. New Japan announced its April tour wouldn't include either Keiji Muto (to give credibility to the idea that WCW signed him away from New Japan) or Hashimoto, but it's hard to believe they could put together a Fukuoka Dome show on 5/5 without both, particularly with Ogawa dislocating his shoulder legit during the match and not being available for the next big event.

Reportedly the response from the internet and in letters to the New Japan office is 70-30 asking him not to retire. They are also doing a gimmick where sumo star Chiyotakikai, who is of the Ozeki rank and has done a gimmick where he's part of Team 2000 (similar to Dennis Rodman a few years ago being part of the NWO), and is a long-time pro wrestling fan and Hashimoto was his favorite, said that he should follow American wrestling and come back with a mask as the Great Shinya.

Descriptions were that the line-up was considered so-so, and most of the matches were good, with the main event and the Takashi Iizuka vs. Kazunari Murakami match, both being derived off that awesome tag match on 1/4 in the same building, as being the most heated matches on the show. But with Ogawa's injury, the company comes out of this card with no obvious stadium main events and only a few weeks to get over an as-yet totally unannounced line-up.

some good matches, but by having the heavyweights win all four matches, ultimately seemed to serve no purpose.

The set up almost seemed too easy, with the junior heavyweights already having lost three matches, for Jushin Liger, who faced Kensuke Sasaki in the next to the last match on the show in a battle of IWGP jr. champion against the heavyweight champion in a non-title, for Liger to score the upset, give the jr's some credibility in future matches of this type, and set up Liger as a title contender for a big show later in the year.

The biggest negative on the show was the Great Muta vs. Masahiro Chono match, described as a slow poor match with an even worse finish. Muta's in-ring style when he does the gimmick almost always results in poor matches, but now, at the age of 37, with bad knees, against a banged up Chono, it was even worse, which wasn't good since these are still the two most popular wrestlers in the company. The gimmick of Muta having signed with WCW was attempted to be given credibility by bringing in Paul Orndorff as his manager and Mona as his valet, and doing an American style finish of Muta blowing mist in the referees eyes for a cheap DQ which never gets over on Japanese big shows. We should have a complete report on the final four matches, hopefully in next week's issue.

1. In the first heavyweight vs. junior heavyweight match, Yuji Nagata beat Kendo Ka Shin (Tokimitsu Ishizawa) in 12:16 with the Nagata lock in what was said to have been disappointing.
2. Manabu Nakanishi scored something of an upset pinning Scott Norton in 11:27 after having him up in the torture rack and dropping him for the pin. This was said to have been the worst match on the card with a lot of comments that Norton is now washed up.
3. In the best of the heavyweight vs. junior matches, Don Frye beat Koji Kanemoto in 9:59 with a heel submission. Reports say that Kanemoto did a great job carrying the match, with fast punches, kicks and submissions. This was described as easily the best match on the undercard.
4. Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Kim Kil Choi) pinned Yutaka Yoshie in 12:34 after a diving head-butt. Yoshie returned from a tour of Europe and training in Calgary under Joe Daigo. Yoshie had a flabby looking physique going in but was a solid worker. His physique improved on his return, but his work in this match was disappointing and overall it was considered as a passable match.
5. Satoshi Kojima pinned Shinjiro Otani in 10:06 after a diamond cutter, a brainbuster and a lariat. The match was pushed as a battle of proteges from Animal Hamaguchi's gym. Otani got some early near falls with his flying moves. The match was described as good, but a disappointment considering who was involved.
6. In the first match on television, Iizuka (Takayuki Iizuka) beat Murakami in 11:26 with a choke. They started the TV show hot as Sakaguchi, Fujinami and Ogawa were all at ringside and Sakaguchi slapped Ogawa in the face which led to a major pull-apart. During the pull-apart, Murakami KO'd Iizuka before the bell. They managed to "awaken" Iizuka for the match, described as the most exciting match on the card.
7. Chono beat Muta via DQ in 16:21. It was American style and poor. Muta knocked out the first

ref so a second ref came out. Chono piledrove Muta on a table. Muta then blew red mist at the referee, who called for the DQ, and the audience heavily booed the cheap finish.

8. Sasaki pinned Liger (Keiichi Yamada) in 7:40. This was said to have been a stiff ground match trading hard punches by Sasaki and the palms by Liger. Sasaki scored a knockout with two punches, then hit the Northern Lights bomb for the pin. Said to be a good match.

9. Ogawa scored his third Tokyo Dome win in a row over Hashimoto in 15:09. This is actually their fifth Dome main event, an all-time record. In Ogawa's pro debut on April 12, 1997, he won a non-title match over then-IWGP champion Hashimoto before 50,000 at the Tokyo Dome in a match where Ogawa subbed for the originally scheduled Ken Shamrock who signed with WWF before actually signing the contract to do the match. Ogawa didn't draw as well as hoped for in the main event in his debut, but beating the world champion his first night in made him an instant star, and just three weeks later, on May 3, 1997, they sold out the Osaka Dome with 53,000 for the rematch which Hashimoto won. Their famous feud started on January 4, 1999 in their semi-shoot, or however you would describe it, match that will become part of Japanese legend which technically was a no contest but everyone considers that Ogawa won, which actually was not the main event that night before a sellout 62,500. This led to the October 11, 1999 rematch that Ogawa won again. This match was described as a battle between Hashimoto's hard kicks and Ogawa's judo throws. Inoki and Sakaguchi didn't second their respective wrestlers, but both were at ringside watching. The finish was via a ten count knockout after an Ogawa STO judo throw.

OCTOBER 9, 2000

The easy one is in the books and now the real test of the All Japan vs. New Japan feud will start.

Pitting All Japan's biggest star, Toshiaki Kawada, in his first singles match against a wrestler from New Japan, IWGP heavyweight champ Kensuke Sasaki, packed the Tokyo Dome for the 10/9 "Do Judge" show with Kawada going over as expected in the non-title match, but in a surprise, Sasaki after the show then vacated the title, saying that since he lost cleanly, he didn't feel he should hold a world heavyweight title.

It was the original plan for Kawada to win the Triple Crown tournament, which ends on 10/28 at Budokan Hall, and then headline the Dome on 1/4 in a rematch with Sasaki. There was a plan on tap for this to lead to a second Dome show on 1/28, honoring Shohei Baba, which would be the week of both the second anniversary of Baba's death (January 31, 1999) and of what would have been his 63rd birthday (January 23, 1938), where Kawada would honor Baba by coming to the ring holding not only the Triple Crown title but also the IWGP heavyweight title, something no wrestler in the history of Japanese wrestling due to the political boundaries has ever held at the same time. In accordance with that, New Japan President Tatsumi Fujinami announced the IWGP belt would be decided in a tournament, and the winner would face winner of the Triple Crown tournament to determine the first ever All Japan/New Japan unified world champion on one of the two January Dome shows.

In what was reported as a main event that lived up to expectations, Kawada pinned Sasaki in

15:38 after a lariat and five high kicks in an ultra stiff match. Kawada was apparently knocked out early on from a stiff punch and couldn't remember anything about the match after it was over. The match came in with high expectations with the pressure of being the "dream match," but delivered with many talking as if it was Sasaki's best singles match of his career and some were talking match of the year after it was over.

After ticket sales got off to a disappointing start, the show ended up being the 13th largest verifiable crowd in the history of pro wrestling, drawing a sellout 54,000 fans paying an estimated \$5.8 million. The show wasn't broadcast on PPV, for reasons I'm not entirely clear of although I guess because TV-Asahi, which aired the three matches from the show at 11 p.m. that evening (Kawada vs. Sasaki, Masahiro Chono & Mr. T vs. Shiro Koshinaka & Masa Fuchi and Shinya Hashimoto vs. Tatsumi Fujinami), wanted to have the first broadcast. It likely would have been the biggest PPV event ever in Japan. The next PPV will be 12/14 from Osaka Furitsu Gym. Tentative idea is to put the winner of the New Japan Super Grade Tag Team tournament against the winner of the All Japan Real World Tag League on that show.

The nearly four-hour show was reported as largely a success, with a very strong first half of the show, largely based around the New Japan wrestlers. Aside from the main event, the All Japan vs. New Japan portion of the show after intermission was something of a disappointment. All Japan ended up winning two out of the three interpromotional matches, with Steve Williams pinning Scott Norton, while Chono & T, who turned out to be Tatsutoshi Goto, beat Koshinaka (New Japan wrestler put on the All Japan side for this feud) & Fuchi. Both of those matches were said to be not good. A fourth scheduled interpromotional match, Yutaka Yoshie vs. Taiyo Kea, was canceled the day before as Kea suffered a serious pelvis injury while competing and winning a Royal Rumble at the All Japan show at Korakuen Hall, somehow it was said doing his Hawaiian crusher finisher on Shigeo Okumura in the final. Kea was taken to the hospital and was expected to remain there until the early part of this week. Early estimates are that he'll be out of action for the rest of the year. Originally Kea was expected to be Kawada's tag team partner in the All Japan tag team tournament.

The next round of the feud is expected to take place on the All Japan show on 10/21 at Nagoya Aiichi Gym with three interpromotional matches--Johnny Smith vs. Michiyoshi Ohara, Williams & Nobutaka Araya vs. Goto & Satoshi Kojima and Kawada & Fuchi & Koshinaka vs. Chono & Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Hiro Saito, the main event being the first time Kawada will ever face Chono to build for the two in an eventual singles program.

1. Shinya Hashimoto defeated Tatsumi Fujinami in 14:18. Hashimoto, in his first match back since announcing his worked retirement after the 4/7 loss to Naoya Ogawa, did the gimmick starting from the opening match. He was said to be in size, somewhere in between the 300+ he had been at his heaviest, and the 250 he was when he made his comeback this year. Hashimoto was actually crying at the pop when he came out. Fujinami was bleeding from the mouth from hard chops. Hashimoto was said to have looked good, but Fujinami at his age is very limited and it was said to be nothing special as a match. Hashimoto won with a DDT followed by a chicken wing submission.

2. Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) pinned Super Delfin (Hiro Wakida) in 13:43. Delfin did a lot of flying moves. Match said to be good, but nothing special. Liger's style now is best suited as being an underdog against the heavyweights because he can't do the high flying junior heavyweight style due to all his injuries and he also physically looks too powerful for the smaller junior heavies. Liger scored the pin after three palm blows and a brainbuster.

3. Don Frye defeated Takashi Iizuka (Takayuki Iizuka) in 4:47 with a series of punches and a choke finish. Iizuka is a good worker at this style and it was said to be a good match building around legit moves and Vale Tudo positioning.

4. Tatsuhito Takaiwa retained the IWGP jr. title pinning Koji Kanemoto in 12:51. Very good match, as you'd expect. Kanemoto worked on Takaiwa's legs most of the way and Takaiwa came back with his signature power moves, scoring the pin after several lariats and a death valley bomb.

5. Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Kim Kil Choi) & Satoshi Kojima retained the IWGP tag team titles beating Yuji Nagata & Manabu Nakanishi in 20:22 in what was said to be an excellent match. New Japan wanted Katsuhiko Nagata to accompany Nagata & Nakanishi to ringside with his silver medal, but the Tokyo Police Department, where Nagata works, was against the idea of a police officer participating in the pro wrestling industry, which speaks volumes about the image of pro wrestling in Japan. They also never got the approval of the Japanese amateur wrestling association, although New Japan did bring much of the Olympic wrestling team to a show before the games, with Nagata getting a big pop, in exchange for a donation. Both teams at various points teased break-ups, including Nakanishi racking Nagata, but then throwing him onto the other guys as a teased split. Final saw Kojima pin Nagata to win.

6. Steve Williams pinned Scott Norton in 12:56. Williams needs a good opponent to have a good match, and Norton can't even have a good match with a good opponent, and that tells you what you need to know. Of course the two big guys did pound on each other hard. They also both seemed to tire. Williams won after a doctor bomb and two back suplexes.

7. Chono & Mr. T (Goto) beat Fuchi & Koshinaka in 12:38. It was immediately evident that Mr. T was Goto, by his distinctive wobbling walk (beginning stages of Terry Funk, minus all of Funk's ability, psychology and charisma). Goto was wearing an old Strong Machine mask, which was popularized again earlier this year when Kazushi Sakuraba came out wearing it before his match with Royce Gracie. This apparently is a New Japan angle as Junji Hirata, who was the original Strong Machine and later Super Strong Machine in the 80s and early 90s, ended up in Koshinaka's corner, even though that was the All Japan team going against Team 2000. Fans were chanting "Goto" at him from the moment he came out. The New Japan fans booed Fuchi big-time. Match ended when Chono gave Koshinaka his Yakuza kick, and then T pinned him after a lariat. After the match ended, T gave Koshinaka his trademark dangerous back suplex, which led to Hirata doing a run-in and grabbing the mic and saying that he was Goto, which everyone had already figured out by this point.

8. Kawada pinned Sasaki in 15:38. A very stiff match which was said to be excellent. Kawada

twice caught Sasaki in his stretch plum submission, but since that move hasn't worked since the early 90s, it didn't get a big reaction. Sasaki twice got Kawada in the scorpion deathlock before the finishing sequence.

JANUARY 4, 2001

New Japan's tenth annual 1/4 date at the Tokyo Dome, "Wrestling World 2001," which is now considered almost a wrestling holiday in Japan, is one of those shows that may be better to judge months from now.

In short-term hindsight, there are a few points about the show, both positive and negative. The positive, besides the obvious packed house, announced at 62,001 fans (the announced number was more a play on the year 2001 than what should be taken for an exact number, but it was sold out with about 52,000 fans), was that most of the matches were very good.

The negative would be the reaction to the finishes of the final two matches, a non-finish in the Riki Choshu vs. Shinya Hashimoto match which was received horribly, and Kensuke Sasaki regaining the vacant IWGP heavyweight title by winning the tournament final pinning Toshiaki Kawada, which was received tremendously, was very much expected, but was probably the wrong finish for long-term business because for the good of the feud, it was too early for Kawada to do a clean job to a New Japan wrestler.

What was even stranger is that the main event on All Japan's 1/28 Tokyo Dome show, Kawada challenging Genichiro Tenryu for the Triple Crown, was changed to Kawada & Sasaki as a tag team against Tenryu & Hiroshi Hase. Kawada after the loss saying he didn't feel like challenging for the Triple Crown any longer. A Kawada tournament win could have made the show a big deal as the winner would become the first man to hold both major world titles in Japanese wrestling history. It was something that had been talked about at one point and teased in the press. They'll push the idea that it's the first time the Triple Crown champion and IWGP champion will be opposing each other.

The match could have box office at some point with Kawada and Sasaki after legendary battles finally becoming a team, but it's probably too soon in the feud to be putting headliners from both companies as a team, because it confuses the promotion vs. promotion issue.

When Kawada lost the Triple Crown finals to Tenryu, the reason was specifically because New Japan was going to beat Kawada in the tournament and All Japan didn't want its world champion losing a singles match to someone from a rival company, let alone in a tournament for that company's belt because it would make the rival belt the real world title belt in Japan and kill the world title credibility of their belt.

Choshu's second match back since his retirement in 1998, had super heat, but ended with a failure attempting to create the January 4, 1998 scenario with Hashimoto and Naoya Ogawa that made their feud the hottest pro wrestling program in Japan over the past two years. The idea was to sell the match like it was an out of control shoot that had to be stopped for the safety of the competitors. But while Hashimoto and Ogawa looked like a shoot, because it largely was, this match, which was both men simply pounding the hell out of each other, didn't have the

aura and when it was stopped, the fans were furious thinking that on the most anticipated match on the biggest show of the year, they were insulted by the promotion not giving them a real finish. Fans were screaming for refunds at that point.

Even though it started after midnight, the show did a 9.3 rating.

1. In the first round of the IWGP tournament, Sasaki beat Satoshi Kojima in 16:33 with a Northern lights bomb and a boston crab submission. Very stiff strong opener. Kojima did a tope early, and was bleeding hardway from the eye most of the way.

2. Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Kim Kil Choi) pinned Yuji Nagata in 16:45 in another first round match after a sick looking Tenzan driver and a moonsault. Generally considered (along with Kawada vs. Tenzan) as one of the two best matches on the show. Nagata looked tremendous, using his kicks and great matwork. Even though it was the result the crowd seemed to want live, the last PPV was headlined with an incredible tag match with the focus on Nagata vs. Kawada, and fans wanted to see them in a singles match and have a finish, plus Nagata had just done a clean job for Mark Coleman a few days earlier at the Osaka Dome show.

3. IWGP jr. tag champs Koji Kanemoto & Minoru Tanaka won a non-title match over Shinya Makabe & Tatsuhiro Takaiwa in 18:02 when Kanemoto made Makabe submit to a standing ankle lock. The junior heavyweights never get a good reaction at the Tokyo Dome and this was no different. Since people were there for the heavyweight tournament, they considered this as intermission but the work in the match was very good as expected with these four, all of whom looked good.

4. Takashi Iizuka (Takayuki Iizuka) beat Kendo Ka Shin (Tokimitsu Ishizawa) in 6:12 with a choke finish in the weakest match on the show. It was sold that this would be a great technical match, but nearly everyone was disappointed the match was so short with the finish coming with no build.

5. Sasaki in the semifinals beat Masahiro Chono in 11:28 with the Power strangle. Only a so-so match due to Chono's condition, but the match had great heat since Chono is the most charismatic of New Japan's full-time wrestlers. People popped pretty big for the finish, but most were disappointed realizing it meant Chono had already been eliminated from the tournament.

6. Kawada pinned Tenzan in 10:45 after a power bomb and bridging pin in what was generally considered the best match on the show. Both guys beat the hell out of each other with chops and kicks. Tenzan bled hardway after doing stiff head-butts. Match had great heat with fans hoping for Tenzan to score the upset that wasn't going to happen. Kawada kicked out of a Tenzan driver, a diving head-butt and a moonsault, before coming back with two high kicks, a back suplex, two enzuigiris and another high kick before the power bomb.

They aired an interview on the screen with Inoki, who, even though he wasn't even there, got the biggest pop of the show. He told fans that the world itself was changing and that pro wrestling needed to change with it and fans shouldn't be scared to support new concepts.

7. Keiji Muto & Shinjiro Otani beat Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) & Manabu Nakanishi in 5:44. Muto is now wrestling with a shaved head. Otani was billed as weighing 233 pounds (he used to wrestle at about 200, although live reports indicated he didn't look much different from usual aside from the bleached blond hair and didn't have a steroid look to him). Match was a surprising squash with Muto weakening Liger with a figure four, and Otani playing powerhouse using moves like a torture rack, which caused Nakanishi to act mad about his move being used, on Liger. Otani even no-sold Liger's comeback, hitting a fast German suplex and his spider bomb while Muto had Nakanishi in an armbar, and then putting Liger in a cobra clutch, and shockingly, Liger "passed out" and actually did a stretcher job to put Otani over as something new and fresh as a threat.

8. Hashimoto and Choshu (Mitsuo Kwak) went to a non decision in 15:20. Both guys pounded the hell out of each other with a ton of heat. Hashimoto came to the ring with Tadao Yasuda and Pride's Alexander Otsuka and wore gloves like it was a shoot fight. They exchanged punches and kicks, with Choshu, now 49, hitting many lariats and Hashimoto hitting stiff kicks. Choshu hit the ref first, and then Hashimoto hit the ref. This brought out Massao Hattori as the second ref. After taking a pounding, Hashimoto went outside the ring and took off his gloves and they exchanged punches, and chops. The idea is that this match was supposed to look like a shoot, but fans know the difference and lariats are great in pro wrestling and Choshu's lariat is super over, but when ref Hattori (who was the ref for Ogawa vs. Hashimoto's famous 1998 match and this "getting out of control and match stopping for no reason" has historical precedents with Antonio Inoki vs. Roland Bock in the 70s and Akira Maeda vs. Andre the Giant in the 80s, both of which were legitimately out of hand as opposed to being scripted to look as such) went to Tatsumi Fujinami, who was at ringside doing color asking if the match should be stopped and Fujinami agreed, the place went nuts. It was not the right kind of heat with chants of "refund money" and the like. Shiro Koshinaka and Junji Hirata hit the ring and Fujinami announced that they had to stop the match for the safety of both men, but the crowd simply didn't buy it.

9. Sasaki pinned Kawada in 10:36 to win the vacant IWGP heavyweight title. Match was short. We've had a variety of different opinions on it, but most said it was very good, with more wrestling than their first match, although not the same level of heat. Sasaki kicked out of Kawada's enzuigiri, back suplex and power bomb. Sasaki made a comeback with lariats leading to a Northern lights bomb for the pin, which got an incredible pop with Sasaki practically crying in the ring when it was over.

Current note: I remember this as being a great show, the best Dome show of that era, largely because of the tournament.

For all the negativity talk about the Tokyo Dome show, watching the TV show that aired later that night, it was an awesome show, and if not for the Choshu-Hashimoto finish, probably would be a strong candidate for best show of the year.

That finish was terrible, and it's unfortunate, because it ruined what up to that point had been an excellent match. Sasaki-Kawada was every bit as good, and maybe better than their previous match. Kawada, based on his two Dome matches and his match on last month's PPV, is the man

in this business, bell-to-bell, even more than Benoit. You could say the wrong guy won, and I'd agree with that viewpoint, but it was the right guy for the moment because it got the gigantic pop and it was the home town guy winning the title at their Wrestlemania. Just, for long-term business, Kawada should have won.

The TV show was the IWGP tournament and Choshu-Hashimoto, but only the final two matches aired in their entirety. Sasaki beat Kojima with two lariats, a Northern Lights bomb and a Boston crab submission. They only aired clips but it looked really good. For all the knocks at Sasaki, he comes across very tough and the loss to Kawada seemed to give him star power that only Muto, Chono and Hashimoto had. Tenzan pinned Nagata after a Tenzan driver (same as the Rikishi driver he used to do as a finisher before the WWF had its wrestlers stop doing those kind of moves) and a moonsault. This one probably lost something in the editing and it didn't seem to have the heat of the previous match. What aired looked good, but it was on TV nowhere close to being the best match on the show. Sasaki over Chono with a short piledriver and a power strangle. Chono no-sold a superplex which was kind of weird. ***3/4. Kawada pinned Tenzan. Tenzan had busted his head open against Nagata, and re-opened the cut doing so many head-butts. Tenzan dominated early and even did a mountain bomb off the middle ropes. Kawada made a comeback, doing the stiffest looking punch to the jaw you'll ever see in pro wrestling. It looked even scarier on the replay. They had great exchanges and it was an excellent match with the power bomb finisher. ****1/4.

Choshu vs. Hashimoto was amazing for the first 10:30. Choshu was actually amazing in this match as he took so much real punishment at his age. Choshu never had matches this good after the late 80s. He also looks amazingly powerful in the ring for a 49-year-old. They tried to reprise their 1996 match, and came close, basically just beating the hell out of each other, particularly Hashimoto delivering sickening kicks to the chest over and over. Choshu mainly did lariats as his offense and Hashimoto mainly did hard kicks to the chest. Choshu did a sloppy back suplex. It was an amazing match until the last three minutes. By this point, both guys were really tired and then Fujinami got up and started signaling to wave the match off. I don't think the ending could have been worse. ***1/4.

That's the only thing about the show where you wonder what the future will hold, because fans were chanting loudly for refunds when it was over, even up until the announcement for the main event and some fans stormed off before the main event they were so upset. After the show was over, there was a lot of sentiment apparently not that they had just seen such a great show, but that they would never come back to New Japan because of that finish.

Sasaki over Kawada I felt was the best match on the show because of its believability and drama. They pounded on each other, and did incredible stuff and it built well. Even though it only went 10:30, when the finish came, it was time because Sasaki had already wrestled 38 minutes. The one thing watching it is that Kawada was so ridiculously superior in ability to Sasaki. ****1/2.

OCTOBER 8, 2001

Paced by a huge walk-up even though it was a rainy day, New Japan put an estimated 37,000 fans (announced as a sellout 61,500 although the building was not close to being sold out) into the Tokyo Dome for what was billed as the 50th anniversary show of pro wrestling in Japan, called "Indicate of Next" on 10/8.

The show, which aired on a three-and-a-half hour tape delay on TV-Asahi to highlight that night's prime time programming on Japanese national holiday "Sports Day," went nearly head-to-head on Japanese network television with a K-1 tournament on the Fuji Network. Wrestling aired from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. while K-1 aired from 7 to 9 p.m. While it turned out the wrestling and K-1 audience are very similar, or at least the wrestling audience will watch K-1 but not necessarily visa versa. Head-to-head over the one hour, New Japan shockingly nipped K-1 by a 10.3 to 10.2 margin. That's because New Japan was airing its main events while K-1 aired a tournament, and everyone knew the semifinals and finals wouldn't air until wrestling was over. New Japan only did a 10.1 in its unopposed half hour, finishing at 10.2. K-1 did a ridiculous 19.6 in its unopposed hour, finishing at 14.9. So basically, unlike in the U.S. when competition led to a huge new audience of fans, these guys split the huge audience head-to-head, and then almost everyone watching wrestling switched to K-1 when wrestling ended.

Antonio Inoki managed to get his hands on both shows, as he sent Naoya Ogawa to the Tokyo Dome to do an angle, while he went to the K-1 show in Fukuoka to announce his 12/31 Saitama Super Arena show which would be a best-of-seven series matching up Inoki sponsored fighters, mostly pro wrestlers, taking on K-1 fighters.

Early reports were that the show was considered a financial success, which it didn't look to be with only about 10,000 tickets sold just a few days before the event for a Dome show with a weak line-up.

While one of the smaller crowds New Japan has ever drawn historically at the Tokyo Dome, it was a lot better then recent Dome shows this year in Osaka, Fukuoka and Sapporo.

From a match quality standpoint, the main event was said to be outstanding and the opener was good. Most of the other matches were said to be fair to decent. It was said that in the Funks match, the older fans, many of whom came back largely for this match, enjoyed the old style but newer fans weren't used to it.

The Goodridge, Fujita and Nakanishi matches were all worked to look like Vale Tudo style.

1. Minoru Tanaka & El Samurai (Osamu Matsuda) & Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) beat Gedo (Keiti Takayama) & Jado (Shoji Akiyoshi) & AKIRA (Akira Nogami Saeki) in 11:18 when Tanaka made AKIRA submit to an armbar. Before the match started, Gedo introduced long-time New Japan star Koji Kanemoto as the newest member of Team 2000 in the junior heavyweight division starting on 10/21 and Masahito Kakihara joining the New Japan junior division was announced after the match. Kanemoto issued challenges to Liger and Tanaka. Said to be the second best match on the show. AKIRA, who is one of the most underrated wrestlers in the business, splashed Samurai through a table at one point.

2. Giant Silva (Paulo Silva) & Giant Singh (Dalip Singh) won a two-on-four handicap match 12/27/20, 10:51 AM

over Hiroshi Tanahashi & Wataru Inoue & Kenzo Suzuki & Yutaka Yoshie in 9:06. New Japan expects the Silva & Singh team to be a big casual audience attraction. Mainly the Giants did little selling, which was smart. Finish saw Singh lay out Tanahashi and Inoue with clotheslines and power bombs and Silva did his Giant splash (really just falling with a press off the middle ropes) on both of them for the pin.

3. Gary Goodridge defeated Michiyoshi Ohara in 3:36. They are trying to get Ohara over as a shooter. Ohara got a lot of early offense including a knockdown right away. Goodridge made the comeback from the mount with a lot of punches before getting the choke in, and the ref stopped it. This win was payback for Goodridge doing the job for Manabu Nakanishi on the PPV.

4. Kendo Ka Shin (Tokimitsu Ishizawa) won the IWGP jr. title from Masayuki Naruse in :26. Ka Shin came out without his mask and was attacked, but made a quick comeback and got the quick armbar to win the title. This continued the huge Ishizawa push ever since his Pride win over Ryan Gracie.

5. Bob Backlund (52) & Tatsumi Fujinami (47) beat Dory (59) & Terry Funk (57) in 10:40. This was billed as a special match having to do with the 50th anniversary of pro wrestling as well as Fujinami's 30th anniversary of his pro debut. The basic storyline is that when Fujinami began his career in 1972, his favorite wrestlers were Dory & Terry Funk. Due to politics, as Funks were the top foreign stars for All Japan, Fujinami was never able to wrestle against them. Even ten years later, when Backlund & Fujinami, as WWF heavyweight and junior heavyweight champions respectively, never were able to wrestle the Funks, who were two of the top stars for the NWA based All Japan promotion at the time the promotions were in their most bitter feud. Backlund & Fujinami only had teamed together twice before, in 1980 matches against Stan Hansen & Dusty Rhodes and Rhodes & Chavo Guerrero. Backlund did his one arm lift of a short arm scissors into a back suplex on Dory as well as his atomic drop. Finish saw Fujinami pin Dory after a backslide. After the match, Seiji Sakaguchi, 58, New Japan's No. 2 star for most of the 70s, talked about wanting to do one last match next year.

6. Riki Choshu (Mitsuo Yoshida Kwak) & Osamu Nishimura defeated Hiroyoshi Tenzan (Kim Kil Choi) & Satoshi Kojima in 10:40 when Choshu used the lariat to pin Tenzan while Nishimura had Kojima trapped in the octopus. They did another break-up tease after the match.

7. Nakanishi beat Tadao Yasuda in 6:20 in what was billed as a Vale Tudo rules match, with both wearing gloves. Nakanishi, who the gimmick is, has been training in stand-up, decked Yasuda. Nakanishi got the win after a spear and a guillotine submission. Yasuda had a masked second wearing an old Gaspar Brother (a pirate gimmick that Bob Orton & Darryl Karoleet used in one of the more forgettable periods in New Japan history) outfit.

8. In what was billed as a non-title Vale Tudo match, Kazuyuki Fujita defeated Kensuke Sasaki in 6:36 in something of an upset. With all the pub surrounding Sasaki's return and his Vale Tudo match, plus being non-title, it would seem this match was a build-up for an eventual IWGP title match. Naoya Ogawa and Kazunari Murakami came out and Ogawa said he would

be wrestling on the 1/4 show at the Tokyo Dome and challenged Fujita, Nakanishi, Yasuda, or Sasaki. Both Sasaki and Fujita went to attack Ogawa. Yasuda also came out and tried to attack him. Sasaki hit a lariat early and dominated the match, pounding stiffly on Fujita, who did his trademark gimmick of taking all that real punishment to the head because he's so tough. Fujita made a comeback and won the match with punches from the mount. It is not a definite Ogawa would work 1/4, because most likely Inoki would want him to work his own 12/31 show and he hasn't shown the propensity for wanting to work dates that close together.

9. Jun Akiyama & Yuji Nagata beat Keiji Muto & Hiroshi Hase in 28:04. This was the symbolic main event as it was the first match ever where New Japan, All Japan and NOAH were in the same match and said to be, not surprisingly, the best match on the show. Hase did a 21 rep giant swing on Akiyama. Muto got a near fall with a moonsault on Nagata. Muto used his shining wizard on Nagata, but began selling the knee. He went for a second moonsault, but once again began selling the knee. Akiyama then hit the wizard on Muto as he had promised. Finish saw Nagata pin Hase clean with a bridging back suplex. Nagata said that he wanted to team up with Akiyama again, this time on a NOAH card in December to build to an eventual Akiyama vs. Nagata singles match. Muto said he wanted to do a match where he would team with Mitsuharu Misawa against Akiyama & Nagata. Akiyama had worked an afternoon show for NOAH in Hamamatsu, but had his usual main event spot moved to the opener so he could catch the bullet train and rush to Tokyo.

JANUARY 4, 2002

With its popularity at its lowest level and coming just a few days after a far more publicized show, what had been the Japanese version of Wrestlemania had several question marks coming in.

To a degree they were answered positively with what most were considering a good turnout and a very good show for "Wrestling World 2002" on 1/4 at the Tokyo Dome. But the TV ratings told a different story.

Just days after his quick knockout loss to Mirko Cro Cop, Yuji Nagata was set to headline by representing New Japan against Pro Wrestling NOAH's Jun Akiyama in their first ever singles match for the latters' GHC title. It was also the first time either man headlined a Dome show as a single. Unlike with Kendo Ka Shin, who couldn't get heat with a blow torch after losing in Pride to Ryan Gracie (and became a bigger star than ever when he avenged that loss), the crowd was behind Nagata as much as ever as the two had what was reported as an excellent main event match before 41,500 fans.

The bad news came a few days later when the television version of the show airing in prime time from 7 to 9 p.m. drew only an 8.2 rating. Those who favor old-style great wrestling over the shoot style direction got knocked for a loop when once again the highest rated match was the Naoya Ogawa vs. Kensuke Sasaki match, which did a 13.2.

Last year the show aired after midnight and still did a 9.3 rating, but had the big hook of the IWGP heavyweight title tournament with Toshiaki Kawada plus the return after several years of

Riki Choshu, which led to TV-Asahi broadcasting the rest of the Dome shows in prime time.

This year's line-up didn't have general public appeal as it was a line-up of good matches, but nothing stronger than you would expect for a major arena show aside from the main event, let alone the biggest show of the year. Akiyama retained the title with two offshoots of his favorite exploder, likely setting up a rematch later this year.

The bad news coming out of the match was that Akiyama suffered a dislocation of the AC joint (shoulder) and actually it was recommended he be out of action for a few months. However, after missing his bookings on the first two NOAH shows of the year the next two days, he is scheduled to return on 1/9. Kendo Ka Shin also tore ligaments in his left knee in his match against Pride's Daijiro Matsui, and will miss the first few shows of the next tour, but is scheduled to be back in action on 2/1 when they run a big show in Sapporo.

It was only the second of the 11 annual shows starting off the year at the Dome not to sellout and was the smallest Dome crowd ever on the traditional day. The only other time they failed to sellout the Dome on 1/4 was in 1994, when this was hardly the tradition it is now, but in other years they didn't have another huge show that got so much mainstream attention in the same area four days earlier.

The only strong negative on the show was the Kensuke Sasaki vs. Naoya Ogawa match, which was said to have been an absolute travesty.

Behind the scenes, Ogawa had refused to do a job, which should have come as no surprise and they should have had a better back-up plan than coming up with an idea sure to ruin the show coming off the fact they did a non-finish last year with Riki Choshu and Shinya Hashimoto that the crowd hated and that was after what up to that point had been an incredible match.

Sasaki and Ogawa ended up doing a short no contest when half the world interfered. The reaction was so negative with fans booing and throwing bottles at the ring that ring announcer Hideki Tanaka was unable to get in the ring to announce the next match for more than five minutes.

The Ogawa problems remain in that the network loves him because he's the biggest ratings draw New Japan can put on, but he's uncooperative and the company has had a problem with him since he stunk out the joint on the 5/5 Fukuoka Dome show when he refused to sell and made Choshu and Manabu Nakanishi look bad.

He's impossible to book because the time has come after four years to job. But either he can't because they are saving him for Rickson Gracie (the plan for years has been to work to create a new-age Inoki in Ogawa for the showdown with Gracie, which was supposed to take place last year, but Gracie wouldn't fight because his son died, and there have been attempts to put the fight on later this year) or he simply won't do business on his own.

The Fukuoka Dome match, the first Choshu-Ogawa confrontation ever in a tag, didn't draw particularly well live, but the match itself drew a 21.1 TV rating, the largest audience to watch a pro wrestling match of 2001.

New Japan hadn't wanted to use Ogawa after that match, but ran an angle on the 10/8 Dome show where he did a run-in and challenged Sasaki, Nakanishi, Kazuyuki Fujita and Tadao Yasuda to set up this match.

After the success of last year's 1/4 Dome show on TV-Asahi, New Japan's other Dome shows last year aired out of the midnight time slot and most pulled good numbers.

The 4/7 Osaka Dome did a 10.7 in prime time, peaking with a total New Japan style match with Masahiro Chono & Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima vs. Muto & Taiyo Kea & Jinsei Shinzaki which did beat out Fujita's IWGP title win over Scott Norton.

The 5/5 Fukuoka Dome did a 12.3 in prime time, with the giant peak for the horrible Choshu-Ogawa fiasco.

The 7/20 Sapporo Dome show, which aired live from 3-5 p.m. on a national holiday Friday afternoon did a 6.2, again peaking for a shoot style Nagata vs. Mark Coleman match.

The G-1 Climax tournament airing live on a Sunday afternoon from 3-5 p.m. did a 7.9, peaking with the Muto vs. Nagata final.

The 10/8 Tokyo Dome airing head-to-head with a major K-1 show on a Monday night from 6:30-8 p.m., did a 10.2, peaking with Fujita vs. Sasaki.

Inoki publicly blamed New Japan for its poor line-up for the rating, noting against much tougher competition, his show four days earlier did a much better number.

It was announced the next Tokyo Dome show will be on 5/2, which will be the company's 30th anniversary show. The idea is to bring back legends from the past for the show including attempting to get Inoki, Hulk Hogan and Seiji Sakaguchi to wrestle. Kazuyuki Fujita is also scheduled to return from his Achilles tendon surgery, ahead of the recommended recovery time, on this show.

1. Masahito Kakihara & Masayuki Naruse beat Wataru Inoue & Katsuyori Shibata in 10:50 when Kakihara pinned Inoue with his Kakki cutter (same as Ogawa's STO). Kakihara is being built up for the next shot at Ka Shin. Said to be a decent opener but a little disappointing.

2. Minoru Tanaka & El Samurai (Osamu Matsuda) beat Koji Kanemoto & AKIRA (Akira Nogami Saeki) in 12:31 when Tanaka pinned AKIRA after a backslide. Said to be a good match. Kanemoto & AKIRA dominated.

3. Kazunari Murakami & Yuki Ishikawa beat Hiroshi Tanahashi & Kenzo Suzuki in 8:07 after a trade of punches and kicks and Murakami got a knockout win with a kick to Tanahashi's head. Finish in particular said to be really exciting. Tanahashi & Suzuki have a lot of potential about three years down the road as a tag team.

Current note: This was the Tokyo Dome debut of Tanahashi, who would go on to become the key in rebuilding the company.

4. Tiger Mask & Great Sasuke (Masanori Murakawa) & Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) beat

Gedo (Keiti Akiyama) & Jado (Shoji Akiyoshi) & Dick Togo (Shigeki Sato) in 20:12 when Liger pinned Jado after a brainbuster. Michinoku Pro, with its guys playing before probably their biggest stage of the year, tried to shoot a Tiger Mask vs. Togo angle during the match. Said to be the second best match on the card.

5. Manabu Nakanishi beat Giant Silva (Paulo Silva) in 6:49 via count out. Except for the finish, this was a lot better than it had any right to be, especially since Silva was selling. Nakanishi got him in a choke and Silva just powered out grabbing Nakanishi's arms and pulling them off him. Great monster spot. Match was built around the rack spot and people were waiting. He actually only had him up for a split second, because Silva was too far forward and no human being can hold a guy that large in that position when the guy doesn't know what he's doing. Anyway, both guys tumbled out of the ring. Nakanishi then, and I'm not making this up, hit a plancha off the top rope onto him, and jumped in the ring to beat the count. Seriously, if they were going to do a count out finish, it couldn't have been better as he did a rack and a plancha. When that bell rang, the crowd died. They were buzzing and it sucked all the life out of them. Nakanishi then raised his arms in victory, beating this giant, and not even the slightest pop. There is a moral to this story, and evidently, they didn't learn it. *1/4

Antonio Inoki came out at this point dressed up as a homeless guy. Inoki and Roddy Piper think the same way and it's just a different way as just about everyone else. He brought out Fujita, who apologized for not being able to wrestle and said that he was returning his IWGP heavyweight title belt. He then introduced Yasuda, who got a huge reaction. Yasuda did a promo saying that he wanted to win the IWGP title. Boy is pro wrestling ever scary at times.

6. Kendo Ka Shin beat Daijiro Matsui to keep the IWGP jr. title. This wasn't nearly what it should have been. Instead of doing quick submissions on the mat, they did the Pride ground & pound spots, except everyone could see they weren't pounding hard. Best spot was Ka Shin kicking Matsui low at the bell (Quinton Jackson finish) and Matsui no-selling. I guess the story was he had a cup (but how much protection is that from a blatant kick?). Either that or, Jackson kicked him so hard they castrated him and now he doesn't have any so it doesn't hurt. No heat. Matsui hit the ref at one point, which is really smart when you are trying to work within a Pride context. Good flying armbar attempt by Ka Shin and a block spot. Ka Shin did that leg choke tarantula type deal and got the pin with a victory roll in 5:43. *

7. Hiroshi Hase & Keiji Muto defeated Tatsumi Fujinami & Osamu Nishimura in 16:44 when Muto pinned Nishimura after the shining wizard. Muto got the biggest pop of the show. As expected, a good old-style technical wrestling match.

8. Kensuke Sasaki no contest Naoya Ogawa in 4:02. The entire show was built around Sasaki vs. Ogawa and the only thing I can say is, what the hell were they thinking? This was worse than Nitro because those Nitros when they pushed a main event and had them go two minutes with everyone running in, at least nobody actually cared about the participants. For all anyone wants to say about Ogawa, and he's overrated, the buzz when he came out is second only to Inoki and he's got a real legit form of charisma that nobody else has. Actually what they did in this match was incredible because it was the most real looking pro wrestling match in a long time. Just it

was too short and a horrendous finish. Sasaki decked Ogawa at the bell with a stiff sucker punch and was pounding on him with a mount when Murakami ran in for pull-apart No. 1. They restarted, and it looked like a total shoot with Ogawa using his STO and pounding on Sasaki when this time Nakanishi ran in. Everyone fought everyone for pull-apart No. 2. They started up again and Ogawa was throwing him around, but Sasaki got the advantage with an attempt at a German suplex (which Ogawa did everything but actually fully block to make it look like he wasn't cooperating) and a lariat when everyone ran in again for pull-apart No. 3. When that bell rang calling it a no contest, man, was that an ugly reaction. The quelled it slightly by keeping the pull-apart going about a minute as Ogawa was being dragged out and Sasaki ran down the aisle to get at him, but once that was over, it was ugly and it's all their fault on this one. They cut away before the bottles started flying but you could see this was the worst idea imaginable. Considering Choshu and Hashimoto had a match last year ten times better than anyone could have hoped for, and it was considered a catastrophe because they did this finish, what were they thinking (I know Ogawa was uncooperative but there are other ways around it) with these guys who didn't have anywhere close to the same quality match doing a similar finish? 3/4*

9. Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima beat Masahiro Chono & Giant Singh (Dalip Singh) in 10:47. The only thing I can say good about Singh is that he didn't screw up his power bomb spot on Tenzan, although it was shaky. I can't imagine what goes through these guys' minds when they agree to take that from him. Finish saw Singh and Silva (at ringside) collide. Kojima clotheslined Singh who fell backwards into a schoolboy by Tenzan. Kojima & Tenzan absolutely could not save this. Singh and Silva argued after the match and were sort of pulled apart. Thankfully they never went at it. 1/2*

10. Akiyama pinned Nagata in 19:58 to retain the GHC title. Really good. The only negative is that Nagata lacked his usual fire. Definitely not the match of the year a lot of people expected. Also, because they worked a lot of submissions, this match would have played better at Sumo Hall. In the TV build-up (it was about 15 minutes into the show before they actually started this match) they showed the Nagata-Cro Cop finish. I guess they had to. Very good matwork the first five minutes and trading exploders. Akiyama landed bad on his shoulder doing a shining wizard at the 5:00 mark so he worked match of the match hurt. Only favored his shoulder slightly. Word was he didn't realize until long after the match was over the severity of the injury. Nagata blocked an exploder and used a guillotine. Spot would have played better with a less casual crowd. Nagata delivered a lot of very hard kicks to the chest. They played off Akiyama's recent head surgery (his head was shaved in the back, making it look like a bald spot) with Akiyama selling after getting a piledriver. Akiyama came back with a sick looking DDT on the ramp. They aired it in slow-mo and really looked bad. He followed with a tombstone on the floor. Akiyama went for a submission with a headlock. Nagata used a DDT and a crossface. They traded hard slaps. Seriously, harder than Stephanie and Debra, but not much. Akiyama used a guillotine. Nagata came back with some high kicks and an armbar. Nagata used an enzuigiri followed by a bridging back suplex for a near fall. After Nagata missed another enzuigiri, Akiyama came back with the emerald frosien (the move Misawa uses on big shows) followed by two offshoots of exploders for the pin. ***3/4

MAY 2, 2002

When is a success a failure?

Answer? When it's the New Japan 30th anniversary card on 5/2 at the Tokyo Dome. Because of the main event dream match of Mitsuharu Misawa vs. Masahiro Chono, which went to a 30:00 draw, the show drew a sellout of 47,000 fans. Except for the traditional 1/4, it was the best Tokyo Dome crowd the company had drawn in nearly two years, since a similar dream match headliner of Kensuke Sasaki vs. Toshiaki Kawada on October 9, 2000.

The bad news was the live two-hour prime time television special only drew a 7.1 rating, finishing in a weak seventh place on the night. It was well known it wasn't going to include Misawa vs. Chono, but instead was built around Naoya Ogawa & Shinya Hashimoto vs. Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Scott Norton. The rating was so weak that many fear that will be the end of pro wrestling in prime time for a while as the network was hoping for at least a 10.0 with Ogawa appearing.

Several factors were given, both ahead of time so they're valid, for the bad number. The main one was going head-to-head with the Japanese national team facing Honduras in the Kirin Cup soccer tournament, which was a huge deal in the country, and drew a 19.7 rating. Unlike in the U.S., the wrestling audience is largely a sports audience and a competing event does hurt.

Second is that the show in television promotion, instead of being built around wrestling, was built around commercials with Antonio Inoki and Chono talking on the phone to each other like they are Vince McMahon and Ric Flair.

With the popularity of WWE being so evident in Japan, both a major TV-Asahi producer and Inoki were interested in learning and copying from what made Raw successful. Japanese sources indicated they expected it would be a failure because that's not what people want New Japan to be. In addition, Ogawa has proven to be a great ratings draw, but it has to be under the right conditions, which is a feud that people can accept as a shoot. It's harder in a tag, because Norton is yesterday's news and Tenzan, while a great worker, isn't someone that people think is a shooter, which is the only kind of opponent people care about Ogawa against.

As it turned out, that match drew an 8.5 rating. The peak rating was for the return of the Steiners, against Hiroshi Tanahashi & Kensuke Sasaki with Joanie Laurer as ref, which did a 9.9.

The show itself lasted nearly six hours, far too long, and the crowd was burned out before the main event got in the ring. Because the television show ended at 9 p.m. and Misawa wasn't allowed by NTV (which he's under contract to and which aired the soccer game) to appear on the rival network broadcast, they had no choice but to drag out the show.

The show opened with a 30th anniversary ceremony which lasted more than one hour before the first match got in the ring. They had a ten bell salute for Lou Thesz. They brought out several former New Japan wrestlers including Animal Hamaguchi, Isamu Teranishi, Shoji Kai, Don Arakawa, Ichimasa Wakamatsu, Yoshiaki Fujiwara and Kotetsu Yamamoto. Riki Choshu

was backstage at the show, but never appeared before the crowd. Umanosuke Ueda, who is crippled from an auto accident, was shown on the video screen. After everyone left, Antonio Inoki came out with Joanie Laurer (be prepared to get ill). Both gave a speech when Tiger Jeet Singh hit the ring and tried to attack Inoki with his Sabre sword. Laurer made the save punching and kicking Singh and challenged him to a match. That wouldn't be the end of her challenges.

Inoki then presented awards to Scott Norton as best foreigner in the history of the company (a distinction people were laughing about), Don Frye as best real fighter, Billy Robinson for greatest match in the history of the company (in 1975, against Inoki, of course), and Singh for best heel. So as not to break character, Singh refused to come out and accept his award. Then it was announced there was a surprise guest, who turned out to be Mitsuko Baisho, a Japanese movie star who was Inoki's former wife. She actually got just about the biggest pop of the show when the two of them together did Inoki's "ichi, ni, san da!" catch phrase. Masakatsu Funaki and Minoru Suzuki of Pancrase fame, both of whom started with New Japan, also came out during the ceremony.

1. In a match from Big Japan, Kintaro Kanemura (Yukihiro Kanemura) pinned Daisuke Sekimoto in 8:03 after a senton off the top rope. Sekimoto worked the match even though he suffered a broken jaw on 4/28. They used a table, but the crowd hated this and it was the worst match on the show.

2. Katsuyori Shibata beat Wataru Inoue in 6:26 in a battle of tag team partners, with Katsuhisa Shibata, Katsuyori's father, as special referee. Said to be a disappointing match.

3. Tiger Mask from Michinoku Pro & Tiger Mask from New Japan (Koji Kanemoto) beat El Samurai (Osamu Matsuda) & Black Tiger (Miguel Gonzalez) in 12:54 when Tiger Mask III (Kanemoto) pinned Black Tiger with, what else, a tiger suplex. Said to be another disappointing match.

4. In a match from All Japan women, Momoe Nakanishi & Kaoru Ito beat Yumiko Hotta & Manami Toyota in 12:16. This match was said to be the show stealer. Even people who are predisposed to not liking the idea of womens wrestling on a mens show admitted this was the best match. Finish saw Nakanishi pin Toyota, who holds the WWWA title, after kicking out of her Japanese Ocean cyclone suplex and pinning her with the Momoe special cradle.

5. Jushin Liger (Keiichi Yamada) & Minoru Tanaka won the IWGP jr. tag titles from Gedo (Keiti Takayama) & Jado (Shoji Akiyoshi) in 17:48. Gedo got near falls on Liger after a back suplex and Gedo superfly (splash off the top). Liger came back with a brainbuster for the pin. Title switch made sense since everyone knew both Gedo & Jado were working hurt anyway. After the match, Liger challenged all of NOAH's jr. heavyweights. Since Tsuyoshi Kikuchi, KENTA, Yoshinobu Kanemaru and Makoto Hashi just happened to be at ringside, they hit the ring and it ended with the New Japan four facing off with the NOAH four.

6. Ogawa & Hashimoto beat Norton & Tenzan (Kim Kil Choi) in 12:02. They did the double-team combination STO and back suplex finisher that they've been doing on Norton and Hashimoto pinned him.

7. Bas Rutten beat Manabu Nakanishi in 6:00 with a triangle choke. Rutten is not that over to wrestling fans, but they are trying to push him as a new shooter type.

8. Don Frye beat Tadao Yasuda in 1:51 with an Achilles tendon submission. Actually they came out before the Rutten match. As Yasuda came to the ring first, Frye ran out and beat him up and pounced him into oblivion. Yasuda was supposedly knocked out, and they announced the bout would have to be moved until later in the show. Yasuda was selling the angle. When the match itself started, Frye just pounded on Yasuda, and after submitting him, challenged Yuji Nagata for the IWGP title.

9. Rick & Scott Steiner (Robert & Scott Rechsteiner) beat Hiroshi Tanahashi & Kensuke Sasaki in 14:38 with Joanie Laurer as ref. They worked several spots with Laurer. Tanahashi went for a spear, and when Scott moved, he tackled Laurer, who didn't go down and no sold it. And Tanahashi is a guy they need to push. They go from putting shooters that can't work over the guys that need to draw to have their hopes for the future work with a woman half their size doing a no-sell spot. After Rick did the bulldog off the top rope, Scott pinned Tanahashi with the SSD, which is a version of a tombstone piledriver. Said to be a decent match. After the match, Laurer not only challenged the four women from AJW that had worked earlier to singles matches, but also challenged Scott Steiner, Tanahashi, Sasaki as well as Nagata, wanting an IWGP title match. At least one person, and I don't know who it is because I don't know who made the call for this to happen, has completely lost their mind.

10. Yuji Nagata retained the IWGP heavyweight title pinning Yoshihiro Takayama in 15:36. Kazuyuki Fujita came out as the corner man for Takayama, so they are trying to make them a tag team. Said to be the second best match on the show. Lots of good moves from both. Strong heat. Nagata got the pin after a series of high kicks. After the match, Nagata grabbed the house mic and issued challenges to Rutten, Fujita, Frye and Sasaki to come after his title. Fujita, who seems to be close to healthy, then hit the ring and attacked Nagata and pounded on him.

11. Misawa and Chono went to a 30:00 draw in the main event. Fans went crazy when Misawa came out. It was evident that lots of NOAH fans were in attendance. Usually when there is a mixed match on a New Japan big show, the crowd is decidedly into New Japan against the outside force. They did both their own trademark spots, but also had Misawa do some Baba moves and Chono do some Inoki moves to make it look like the spirit of Baba against the spirit of Inoki. Misawa did his elbow suicida (tope into a forearm shot). Misawa hit him emerald frosien for a near fall. Back in the ring, Chono used the octopus, which was Inoki's 70s move. Misawa did a Russian leg sweep, which was a Baba move. Chono then did the STF, which is his move as a tribute to Thesz. Misawa hit a flying clothesline, which was the move Baba used in famous wins over Jack Brisco and Harley Race for the NWA title. Chono kicked out of a Tiger driver. Chono went for a piledriver but Misawa reversed it into a huracanrana. Misawa went for a power bomb but Chono also did a huracanrana. Misawa was throwing forearms when the time limit expired. Said to have been a good match, but the dead crowd after being out there for so long hurt it.

OCTOBER 14, 2002

When the dust settled on New Japan's 30th anniversary show on 10/14 at the Tokyo Dome, a few things became clear, with an exclamation point.

Most of what the company is doing has little interest. Its new gimmicks are flopping. But the show ended up being a success for one huge reason—Bob Sapp.

After two nationally televised angles at major sporting events in the country on prime time television in the days leading up to the show, a crowd of an estimated 28,000 came to the Dome (announced at 50,000) to see the show titled "The Spiral," even though watching the wrestling show TV build-up leading to the show, "The Swirl" would have been more apropos. From the strong last week ticket sales and huge walk-up and the crowd response, they came largely to see Sapp's Japanese pro wrestling debut against Manabu Nakanishi.

The show also increased the power of Kazuyoshi Ishii, the K-1 promoter, who appears to have the two biggest drawing foreign attractions for matches with pro wrestlers, whether it be for K-1, Pride or pro wrestling, in Sapp and Mirko Cro Cop, under contract. This gives him more leverage and power within the pro wrestling world for 2003, the year that many think the business will change greatly.

The show was still New Japan's lowest drawing show ever in the building of its greatest successes. And Sapp was only a late desperation replacement because Yoshihiro Takayama, Nakanishi's scheduled opponent, was injured in his GHC title match with Mitsuharu Misawa three weeks before the show. Without that "unlucky" break, the crowd would have been far smaller. Based on early sales, this was looking to be a disaster in the making, particularly when it became clear that no matter how hard it was being pushed, the wrestling fans really didn't want to buy tickets to see the Masahiro Chono vs. Joanie Laurer match that got the majority of the build-up on the company's own TV. Considering New Japan's current popularity and the advance, the crowd was considered a pretty good success, even if the show overall wasn't.

Sapp and Nakanishi shot their first angle on 10/5 after Sapp's biggest career win, on the K-1 show where he beat Ernesto Hoost. The two shot a second angle five nights later on a TV-Asahi live boxing special. Sapp was doing the commentary at ringside for a featherweight title fight, where Nakanishi was going to present the belt to the winner after the match. As Nakanishi left the ring, Sapp got up and threw his bottle of water all over Nakanishi and the two had a pull-apart.

You never get a second chance to make a first impression, and there was little doubt with all the focus on him, both the wrestling crowd was going to have to respond, and the match was going to at least have to be heated. There was little doubt people would respond to his ring entrance, but once the bell rang, it was another story. This was a dead crowd for just about every match up to that point. However, the crowd chanted for both Sapp and Nakanishi, who did a power match. It was built around a few key spots. It opened with Nakanishi going for a takedown, but Sapp blocked it and destroyed him with a power bomb, attempting to reprise what is now a famous spot from Sapp's Tokyo Stadium match with Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira. Sapp got a mount position and started throwing punches. Nakanishi made the ropes, but Sapp refused to

break and they had five referees hit the ring to pull Sapp off. Nakanishi tried spears and a lariat but Sapp no-sold the spots. They were brawling outside the ring when Sapp used the torture rack, Nakanishi's finisher, on him. After being thrown in the ring, Nakanishi made a comeback. He tried a German suplex, but Sapp was too powerful and blocked him. In the big pop, which allowed Nakanishi to save face while losing, he got the 6-6 1/2, 375-pound (give or take 25 pounds in either direction) Sapp up for a torture rack and held him for about 20 seconds. The match ended in 6:28, when Sapp hit Nakanishi with a very stiff dropkick, sending him out of the ring. Sapp power bombed him on the floor, and Nakanishi was counted out. Reports were that nobody minded the count out finish because it came across as a decisive win. It was clear they had a back-up plan in case the match bombed, as several of the wrestlers hit the ring and had a big brawl after the match as Sapp left. However, the fans didn't even care about the big New Japan vs. Inoki heels brawl, and were chanting for Sapp and all eyes were on Sapp as he left the ring while everyone else brawled. It was said the crowd reaction made it obvious that Sapp is right now the biggest star in Japanese pro wrestling, as well as kickboxing and MMA. Even though there was one match left, with Yuji Nagata retaining the IWGP title against Kazuyuki Fujita, that match came across as anti-climactic, and in hindsight everyone recognized Sapp should have gone on last. However, that also showed danger, as a guy under contract to another promoter who had never wrestled completely overshadowed not only New Japan's world title match, but everyone in its promotion on its anniversary show.

The show itself ended up lasting six hours, starting one hour earlier than advertised with three warm-up matches.

After disappointing ratings for both the May Tokyo Dome show (7.1 in prime time) and August G-1 finals (5.7 in a Sunday afternoon slot, although they deserved that one since most of the two hour special consisted of interviews as opposed to showing wrestling matches), TV-Asahi didn't even give New Japan a prime time TV or even same day special for the show. Instead, they are getting a two-hour special on 10/19 which starts at the prime ratings drawing 2:30 a.m. period..

FOX Network cameras in the U.S. were also at the show doing a feature on Joanie Laurer's success wrestling men in Japan. Seriously. The segment was to air on 10/21, but at press time it wasn't clear what show it would be on. Wouldn't be surprised to see "Best Damn Sports Show Period" since Laurer and Antonio Inoki were guests on the show not too long ago.

1. Blue Wolf pinned Toru Yano in 5:59 after a Mongolian slam in the first of three unadvertised matches.
2. Gedo & Jado beat El Samurai & Wataru Inoue when Gedo pinned Samurai in 11:33 with a Superfly splash off the top rope. This was said to be pretty good.
3. Hiro Saito & Tatsutoshi Goto beat Shiro Koshinaka & Takashi Iizuka in 9:58 when Saito pinned Iizuka after a senton off the top rope.

They then had the symbolic opening of the show. A video package aired showing the 30-year history of New Japan Pro Wrestling, and then hyped the final seven matches on the show, which were a team of Inoki shooters against New Japan wrestlers.

4. Jushin Liger & Masahito Kakihara & Tiger Mask beat Ricky Reyes & Rocky Romero & American Dragon in 12:26 when Liger pinned Romero after a brainbuster. Reyes & Romero are also known as the Havana Pitbulls. Crowd was dead and the match was so-so. Reports were that Dragon did not impress people in his first high profile match.

5. Hiroshi Tanahashi & Kenzo Suzuki beat Shinya Makabe & Minoru Fujita in :31. Suzuki attacked Fujita at the bell and speared him for the pin right away. Makabe, who had never tagged in for what was his big return to New Japan after being gone more than a year, demanded a rematch.

6. Makabe & Fujita beat Tanahashi & Suzuki in 7:29. Fujita sold that he was injured from the spear for several minutes, so most of this match was Makabe alone against both men. The idea was to get Makabe over as an underdog surviving, but it didn't work as he didn't look good. Fujita managed to make a hot tag comeback just before the finish, which ended when Makabe pinned Suzuki with a dragon suplex. People were scratching their heads trying to make sense out of this.

7. Koji Kanemoto retained the IWGP jr. title beating The Heat (Minoru Tanaka under a mask) in 18:43. This was a huge disappointment, to the point that a lot of people are questioning whether to drop the Heat character completely. After a lot of hype two months back for his debut, it hasn't gotten over at all, partially because everyone knew it was Tanaka to the point the promotion didn't even bother to hide it. Everyone knew Jushin Liger was Keiichi Yamada in 1989 when he debuted, and he became one of the greatest jr. heavyweight stars in history. The original plan was also for Heat to win the title, so the decision it wasn't working was made before the match, but it's amazing they booked a super hero aimed at the kids to lose clean in his high-profile debut, which basically killed him right off the bat. Turned out to be prophetic. Heat was said to have been very nervous and didn't look as good as usual. They did little in the way of high-flying, mainly working a submission-based match that got no heat, ending with Kanemoto winning with the ankle lock. After the match, Kanemoto said he wanted his next defense to be on 10/26 against Bas Rutten.

8. Tsuyoshi Kosaka upset Tadao Yasuda in the semifinals of the tournament to crown the revival of the NWF World heavyweight championship (the belt Antonio Inoki held during the 70s, including in his highest profile match against Muhammad Ali). This puts Kosaka vs. Takayama in the title match on 1/4 in the same building. The plan, unless it has changed, would be for Takayama to go over because Kosaka signed a two-match deal. Both guys traded mount position punches until Kosaka got a heel hook for the submission in 2:15. At least it was short. Yasuda is terrible, but it's still New Japan having its main event lead heel lose by submission quickly to a mid-level MMA fighter who is coming off a series of losses. It once again emphasized the idea that MMA is a higher quality than pro wrestling, which is one of the reasons New Japan's core business is dropping. Kosaka in years past with RINGS when he did worked matches, had some incredible matches, particularly legendary bouts with Kiyoshi Tamura and Volk Han, so it at least leads to a stronger match on 1/4, even if a New Japan world title is going to be decided in a match with an MMA guy against a NOAH guy.

9. In the first match of the best-of-seven series, and in something of an upset, New Japan's Yutaka Yoshie beat Ryushi Yanagisawa in 5:33 with a Mil Mascaras style flying body press. This was said to have been the most heat up to this point in the show, which is scary. Apparently Yoshie was aggressive so the crowd got behind him, even though Yanagisawa looked terrible as usual. Something of a one-sided match for Yoshie as well.

After intermission, two guys wearing Inoki masks came to the ring. They started fighting, with the one Inoki knocking the other out of the ring. The guy on the outside unmasked as Kengo Kimura, an 80s star with the promotion. The guy left in the ring unmasked, revealing Inoki to a big pop. Inoki did the "ichi, ni, san da!" catch phrase to the biggest pop thus far in the show.

10. Osamu Nishimura and Bas Rutten went to a ten round (30:00) draw under European rules. Crowd treated this match as a second intermission. Mostly matwork, and this was a style clash of major proportions. Nobody could believe they went so long, as with the break between rounds, this thing went 40:00. Nishimura's matwork specialty is based on pro wrestling moves from the 70s Funk-Brisco playbook. Rutten's groundwork is based on working a shoot style based on his Pancrase background. To give it the European flavor, Nishimura lost his temper in round eight and started throwing elbows, and got a yellow card as a result. Because of how the best-of-seven was booked to turn out, they needed a draw and in New Japan when you need a draw, you go with Nishimura. But it was a bad idea to take a guy like Rutten who has only had a half-dozen pro matches and put him in the position to have to wrestle that long on a show of this caliber .

11. Kazunari Murakami of the Inoki side evened it up at 1-1-1, with a win over Masayuki Naruse in 4:22 with a choke. Mainly a brawl, which is Murakami's specialty. Naruse jumped him at the bell. Murakami made a comeback with a lot of punches and kicks before doing the choke.

12. Great Muta (real name Troy Enders) pinned Hiroyoshi Tenzan in 6:43 with his new finisher, called the tornado clothesline. Told it's a cross between a facebuster and a clothesline. The big surprise and highlight of this match was the re-appearance of the Great Kabuki (54-year-old Akihisa Mera), the early 80s star who popularized the spewing green mist first in the U.S. and later in Japan. Since the original idea of the Great Muta was that he was the son of Kabuki in the U.S. (a lame premise nobody in the U.S. bought and was quickly forgotten), and for Japan, more that the Muta gimmick was the son of the Kabuki gimmick, this was New Japan's way of trying to legitimize this failing angle. Kabuki came in and did his twirling the nunchakus at the start like he used to do in his heyday, but it was said to look bad because Muta didn't do anything. They blew mist together at the end. Fans hated this match because they wanted to see Tenzan, the company's most popular real worker (Chono is a personality and not a worker, Nagata is a great worker but doesn't have Tenzan's charisma) do a good wrestling match as opposed to being wasted in a bad gimmick match. They didn't have a good match because Tenzan had to sell the Muta stuff that people don't buy. Finish saw Tenzan go on the top rope for the diving head-butt, when Kabuki blew red mist into his eyes and Muta finished him off. The gimmick finish only made things worse. This put Inoki's foreign army up 2-1-1.

13. Masahiro Chono pinned Joanie Laurer in 11:35. They had the big ring entrances. Laurer was

carried to the ring like she was an Egyptian queen on the shoulders of four guys. Chono came out in a black limo. Wallid Ismail, the Pride star and famous Brazilian fighter, was in Laurer's corner for the match. Ismail is the shoot instructor at Inoki's L.A. Dojo and has been training Laurer as well as the pro wrestlers at the school in shooting. Highlights were Laurer using both an abdominal stretch and an STF on Chono. Chono kicked out of the lariat by Laurer twice. Laurer kicked out of Chono's first Yakuza kick. Chono ended up winning with a second Yakuza kick and then spanked her after the match. Laurer gave Chono a low blow after and also beat up the Kevin Kelly-like TV announcer after the match by giving him a low blow. It was said that most of the live crowd didn't like the match, but New Japan and Inoki were hopeful the curiosity factor of it would draw a TV rating. When asked after the match if he'd give Laurer a rematch, Chono said, "Only if she gets a sex change."

14. Sapp beat Nakanishi via count out in 6:26 to give the Inoki side a 3-2-1 lead. Takayama was at ringside for the match. They did the big Makai Club brawl with the New Japan guys after the match to try and save things in case the match wasn't good. Sapp challenged to Nagata for the IWGP title after the match.

15. Yuji Nagata beat Kazuyuki Fujita in 12:55 to retain the IWGP heavyweight title Fujita had never lost in the ring last year (he had to vacate it after tearing his Achilles tendon). Many people in Japan viewed their match in June of last year as one of the best matches of the year (as far as having a great match doing a Pride style match in pro wrestling that got over, it was noteworthy and got many Match of the Year media votes, but certainly not the best match of the year). They did a lot of submissions early. Said to be a real good match, but not a ton of heat. It took four back suplexes before Nagata was able to get the pin. Nagata suffered a legit back injury during the match and was hurting pretty bad afterwards and will be out of action for about two weeks. So the show ended with the Inoki army and New Japan tied at 3-3-1, which is a flat finish, but people didn't seem to care about the best-of-seven. After the match, both Nagata and Fujita said they wanted a match with Cro Cop. At this stage of the game, I don't know how wise a move that is.

JANUARY 4, 2003

The question of how far tradition can carry a company was answered for New Japan Pro Wrestling on 1/4.

For years, the company has been able to pack the Tokyo Dome, whether business was good or bad, just because there was a tradition, which started in 1992, that the biggest pro wrestling event of the year in Japan takes place on that day in the Tokyo Dome.

Even when the company hasn't been hot, that has been a constant. But the declining fortunes of the company combined with a weak line-up and so many much bigger shows in a short period of time put tradition down for the count as New Japan only drew an estimated 30,000 fans (announced as a face saving 50,000), and even that figure included some late papering, for a disappointing five-hour show. It was the smallest crowd for a New Japan show in the building of its greatest successes. Whether it's the Pride August stadium show, the K-1 Grand Prix, or

Inoki Bom Ba Yae on New Years Eve, it is clear calling the 1/4 Dome show the Japanese Wrestlemania is now a dated reference.

It was so bad that when Hisashi Shinma, the booker and business head of New Japan during one of its boom periods in the late 70s and early 80s, came out to appear at his first New Japan show in 20 years, he specifically said that New Japan has no exciting programs, which is nice to bury the company in the middle of its biggest show of the year. With New Japan, at many points in history the leading sports entertainment promotion in the world, falling on hard times, Antonio Inoki went to Shinma to try and bring it back. Shinma said he hoped they could come up with ideas to heat things up and duplicate their past success. Inoki came out and said he would work with Shinma to bring back the kind of exciting heated programs New Japan was known for. While Shinma has one of the greatest booking track records in pro wrestling history, the history of this business is littered with once great bookers who left the scene for years (and in this case, 20 years is longer than those), and came back to a changed business and fan base they weren't able to understand.

Shinma and Inoki have been hated enemies for years, ever since Shinma and Antonio Inoki's secretary turned Inoki in for malfeasance of public office and nearly got him impeached from the Japan Diet (Senate) in 1994. Shinma also wrote many articles saying that Inoki's great winning record was something they manufactured, as opposed to something real. However, New Japan has gotten so bad that Inoki went to Shinma, who was able to book and come up with the angles and storylines that made Inoki the most enduring wrestling cultural icon of the modern era. Shinma was the brains behind Inoki's so-called mixed martial arts challenges in the late 70s against so-called martial arts stars as well as name boxers like Muhammad Ali and Chuck Wepner and judo legend Willem Ruska that made him a national sports hero. Shinma was also the brains behind the junior heavyweight division in the late 70s and early 80s, the Tiger Mask phenomenon, and the interpromotional group vs. group feud (first with New Japan vs. IWE but more successfully with Ishingun vs. Seikigun in 1982-83) that created the Riki Choshu phenomenon and were the real precursors to the NWO angle in the U.S. After New Japan became the most successful pro wrestling company up to that point in history, turning a \$9 million profit in 1982, Shinma was ousted from power by a coup d'etat from several of the wrestlers who weren't earning nearly what they thought they should be, and it was discovered that company wrestling profits were being funneled to carry several of Inoki's money losing outside businesses. After being booted out, Shinma formed the original UWF in 1984, but lost a power struggle there when top star Satoru Sayama insisted that either Shinma goes or he goes, and the money backers felt Sayama was more valuable. He'd been on the periphery of the business, working with Inoki, until their falling out.

Even worse, TV-Asahi, which gave the promotion a two-hour late night television, decided against running two hours of highlights from the show. Instead, they decided to air the top two matches, Yoshihiro Takayama vs. Tsuyoshi Kosaka to bring back the NWF World heavyweight title (the belt Inoki wore as world champion when he faced outsiders from other sports in the 70s), and Yuji Nagata vs. former UFC heavyweight champion Josh Barnett for the IWGP title. The rest of the show was a countdown of the so-called 30 biggest matches in the history of the

promotion, which included clips of Ali vs. Inoki, which they listed as the greatest match (the match was a complete disaster when it took place but time and history have been very kind to it). Also, for the first time ever airing on Japanese television was the Andre the Giant vs. Akira Maeda match from 1986 that fell apart due to a lack of cooperation and nearly ended Andre's career.

The Dome show opened with a ceremony with all the wrestlers on the roster coming out. The big surprise and pop was Brian Johnston coming out as a roster member for his first New Japan show since suffering his stroke, and walking to the ring on his own power. Johnston got a big pop from the crowd, which didn't know he'd be there, and said thanks. Also appearing in the ceremony were Massao Hattori and Masa Saito, both working their final date with the company, as they are leaving for Riki Choshu's new promotion.

New Japan's next Tokyo Dome show at this point is scheduled for 5/2 with the working idea to do a title vs. title unification match with Yuji Nagata vs. Yoshihiro Takayama. Hiroyoshi Tenzan talked about wanting a singles match against Satoshi Kojima after the show.

1. Osamu Nishimura pinned Tatsumi Fujinami in 8:10 by escaping the dragon sleeper and using the Japanese rolling crotch cradle hold. It was the first time Nishimura had ever beaten Fujinami in a singles match. Match had no heat and was said to have been so-so.

2. In the first round of the Young Generation tournament for the next IWGP title shot, Yutaka Yoshie pinned Shinya Makabe in 13:20 after a spinning backfist, and a Thesz press, followed by a splash off the top rope. Also said to be so-so.

Current note: Shinya Makabe is now Togi Makabe, in his debut at the Tokyo Dome.

3. In the other first round match, Ryushi Yanagisawa beat Kenzo Suzuki in 9:23 with an ankle lock. Worst match so far on what was turning into a bad show.

4. Makai Club I (Junji Hirata) & Daimajin (Paulo "Giant" Silva) defeated Tatsutoshi Goto & Hiro Saito in 7:50 via DQ when Goto hit ref Black Cat with a chair. Silva didn't get over in his debut as a masked man. Well, the gimmick was copied from the old Giant Machine gimmick when they made Andre a masked wrestler, and that was a failure as well, and it was much easier for huge monsters to get over in those days when it wasn't as important that they could move or wrestle. A terrible match and people hated the idea that Daimajin didn't even score a pinfall win in his debut against mid-level guys. After the match, Daimajin used a power bomb and lariat on Saito, and manager Kantaro Hoshino counted three, as he covered him.

5. Makai Club IV (Katsuyori Shibata) & V (Mitsuya Nagai in his New Japan debut, after quitting All Japan during the last week of the tag tournament) beat Takashi Iizuka & Masahito Kakihara in 10:54. This was weird in that they tried to build this match around a grudge match with Nagai vs. Iizuka. On June 6, 2001, during an All Japan vs. New Japan Interpromotional match, Iizuka was accidentally knocked out with a brutally hard kick aimed for his chest that instead caught his face by Nagai and was out of action for more than a year. They tried to push it as an Iizuka vs. Nagai grudge, since they haven't met since, but had Nagai under a mask. V was talking to Iizuka in the ring and building the grudge telling him he'd do it again. Finish saw V do

a springboard high knee to Iizuka for the pin. Match was mainly all four trading a lot of kicks standing but was only so-so.

6. Jushin Liger & Koji Kanemoto & Takehiro Murahama beat Tiger Mask & The Heat (Minoru Tanaka) & Masayuki Naruse in 16:10 when Kanemoto made Naruse submit to an ankle lock. Best match up to this point on the show by far. Everyone looked good except Naruse, who is terrible at pro style, and Heat, who seems to have lost his ability (probably more his confidence) with his new gimmick somehow. Naruse went into the match with a shoulder injury, and they built the match storyline around the idea that all three opponents were working on his shoulder to allow him to sell the injury and have a wrestling reason. It was known going in he needed surgery, so they did the angle here and he'll get the surgery and be out for three months. Liger & Kanemoto (IWGP jr. champ), who have been rivals for years, were put together as a team to build up for them going to NOAH and attempting to be the "dream junior team" to take the IWGP jr. tag titles back.

At this point came the intermission, with Shinma coming out first after intermission. Inoki came out after Shinma did to his usual biggest pop of the show. Coming out also was Masafumi "Gong" Nakayama, a Japanese soccer star, who gave Inoki flowers as they noted that he'll turn 60 on 2/20. Nakayama led the crowd in singing "Happy birthday" to Inoki, and then Inoki slapped him in the face.

7. Yanagisawa beat Yoshie in 6:48 with an armbar to win the Young Generations tournament. At first he was to get an IWGP title match on 2/2 in Sapporo, but it was changed to an NWF title match on 2/16 at Tokyo Sumo Hall. Not good at all. Fans booed Yanagisawa, as much because he's a heel as because he looked bad.

8. Michiyoshi Ohara & Shinsuke Nakamura scored a major upset over Tadao Yasuda & Kazunari Murakami in 7:12. The idea was to continue the momentum of pushing Nakamura as a rookie sensation, coming off his strong effort in losing to Daniel Gracie a few days earlier. Nakamura was all bandaged up, as he bled in that bout. Yasuda & Murakami pounded on him to re-open the cuts from New Years Eve until he was heavily bleeding. Ohara looked terrible, but only tagged in briefly, so the bout was the heels pounding on Nakamura, and in particular Murakami doing his wild, reckless offense on him. Nakamura got a reversal on Yasuda into an armbar, and the ref stopped the match. Huge pop for the finish.

9. Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan beat Manabu Nakanishi & Masahiro Chono in 23:18. This was the match of the night as the TenKoji tag team, which was Japan's best before Kojima jumped to All Japan in January, reunited for the first time since last year's 1/4 show. Before the match, Chono came out with Hiroshi Tanahashi. Fans popped big for Tanahashi. Nakanishi came out and attacked Tanahashi and threw him out of the ring so he could do the match. Tenzan came out with his new "Robocop" looking ring costume. Match ended when Tenzan pinned Chono after a moonsault and a Tenzan tombstone driver. As they were celebrating, Tanahashi hit the ring and attacked them. But both guys ended up beating on Tanahashi. Hattori worked as referee for this match in his final appearance with the promotion. Nakanishi challenged Tanahashi after the match.

10. Yoshihiro Takayama won the vacant NWF heavyweight title in the tournament final over Tsuyoshi Kosaka in 10:12. The NWF belt was New Japan's major "world" title from 1973-81 (at some points it wasn't called a world title because New Japan had joined the NWA, and even though they were never able to get dates on the NWA champion, they abided by the bylaws and took world out of the belt's name) when Inoki usually had it. To make it authentic, they also used Kotetsu Yamamoto as referee. Takayama's right eye was all red and bloodshot from the Sapp match a few days earlier. After that match, nobody expected he'd be able to appear here and some thought he was hiding a broken right orbital bone. Said to be a real good match with a lot of nice mat wrestling, ending with Takayama using a high German suplex and a high knee for the pin.

11. Yuji Nagata retained the IWGP heavyweight title over Josh Barnett, the former UFC heavyweight champ, in 10:40. Barnett, who won the title from Randy Couture, was stripped of it before making his first title defense, after being suspended in Nevada for testing positive for three different anabolic steroids. This iced Barnett from fighting in Pride as well until February. Enson Inoue was in Barnett's corner. Bout opened with Barnett hitting a high kick, to play off Nagata's quick knockout loss to Mirko Cro Cop. Nagata got up just before the ten count. Nagata used an exploder followed by weakening Barnett with a choke version of the crossface, followed by a second exploder for a near fall. Barnett caught Nagata in a guillotine choke, but Nagata escaped using another exploder and got the pin with a rolling kick to the head. It was Nagata's seventh straight defense of the title, putting him just two behind the record setting nine straight defenses set by Shinya Hashimoto in 1994-95 during his one year reign as champ. Barnett put Nagata in an armbar after the match. The gimmick is that in Barnett's sport, pins aren't part of it so he lost by pin and he shook Nagata's hand. Takayama then came out and challenged Nagata to unify both belts and create a real world champion.

MAY 2, 2003

In what has to be regarded as a groundbreaking pro wrestling event, and the question is still open whether that's a good or bad thing, New Japan's "Ultimate Crush" on 5/2 at the Tokyo Dome was the biggest show in history in which half the matches were worked and half were shoots.

Unlike other shows in the past, the difference was, this had no pretense about it since they were advertised that way in advance.

The show was very controversial ahead of time by fans of both real and worked matches, and even fans of both, that don't like them being on the same bill (although in the past when RINGS did it, nobody seemed to complain much). Those who favored a traditional approach to pro wrestling in Japan and have seen the rise of Pride and K-1 and a decline in pro wrestling popularity saw this as almost treason. It was the country's biggest pro wrestling company on its second biggest show of the year trying to draw using shoot matches. Fans of shoot matches didn't like the idea of them appearing on New Japan stage, feeling it would blur the line as to what is and isn't real, as if that line wasn't already blurred at times in Japan. The feeling from both sides is the show would bomb.

As it turned out, most live reports listed the show as a success. The event was broadcast live on PPV and in a three-hour edited version the next night on TV-Asahi in a post-midnight time slot. The company did its best job in a long time as far as hyping every match on the show on television, and the recent television shows have been almost textbook in how to build up matches that the fans would normally have no interest in and making them important. The only two matches that would have significant appeal going in without the TV hype would have been the top two bouts, which featured Yoshihiro Takayama ending Yuji Nagata's reign as IWGP champion and the first ever singles match between GHC heavyweight champion Kenta Kobashi against New Japan's biggest remaining regular drawing card, Masahiro Chono.

The four hour, 40 minute long event drew a nearly full house estimated at 39,000 to the Dome. It was announced as a sellout 55,000. All of the expensive seats and the middle deck were totally packed. The upper deck was mostly, but not completely full. The crowd reactions to the worked matches were better than for the shoot matches, but that was because the worked matches were of higher quality. Reports were that crowd reactions were more based on quality and who was in the matches, as the first worked matches got little reaction, and the first shoot match got little reaction as well. But the crowd was into both worked and shoot matches later in the show, although nothing to the level of the Kobashi vs. Chono match, which Kobashi won in 28:27 to keep his championship. The match was a big enough deal that a photo of Kobashi nailing Chono with his winning lariat made the front page of most of the sports newspapers the next day.

The show drew a 3.1 rating the next night on television from 1:30 to 4:30 a.m on TV-Asahi. The network was said to be thrilled with that kind of number in that time slot, especially because it built rather than fell off. The peak rating was at 3:30 a.m. for the Sumiazabazar Dolgolsuren vs. Tsuyoshi Kosaka match with a 4.2. The feeling was this rating put the company in good shape to get its October Dome show airing in prime time. The show was also said to have set a record for a traditional pro wrestling show in Japan on PPV.

Even though it was Kobashi vs. Chono that drew the house, as ticket sales were dead until the announcement of that match, it was Takayama and Nagata who closed the show with both the IWGP and NWF titles at stake. After Takayama won the very good match in 18:17 with a German suplex, he was announced as a double champion. It was made clear that the belts themselves were two different titles and not a unified world championship, since they did a post-match angle with Hiroyoshi Tenzan where it appeared that Tenzan's upcoming match with Takayama (no date was announced) would only be for the IWGP belt.

On the shoot match side, New Japan had two big winners in Shinsuke Nakamura, the rookie former college wrestling star, and former UFC star Josh Barnett. Nakamura was able to use his wrestling ability to take K-1's Jan "The Giant" Nortje off his feet and control him, finally beating him in 3:12 of round two with a guillotine choke. Barnett, who made a point to portray himself as representing New Japan and saying he was a pro wrestler as opposed to being an MMA fighter who is doing pro wrestling, used his stand-up skill to take advantage of 295-pound former King of the Cage superheavyweight champion Jimmy Ambriz (who trained down from

his normal fighting weight of more than 330), who vacated his title to take this match. Ambriz won the title last year from the latest pushed foreign star in Japan, Dan Bobish of WJ.

The card, which went head-to-head with a Zero-One show that sold out Korakuen Hall about 50 yards away, was the second straight night at the Tokyo Dome. The building was booked on 5/1 for an Inoki festival, which was anything but a success. The gimmick was if you bought a ticket for 5/2, you could attend 5/1 free. However, even with that, only about 8,500 (announced at 11,000) attended the first night, which was largely built around seeing Inoki leg wrestle (his new gimmick, laying on your back and doing arm wrestling except with your leg) various people. There were a few pro wrestling matches with wrestlers not booked on the big show, with the highest profile match among active wrestlers being a tag with Masahito Kakehara & AKIRA over American Dragon & Rocky Romero when Kakehara used Inoki's famed octopus submission on Romero in what was said to have been a ***. The show also had an "Old Boys" Battle Royal. It ended up built around 61-year-old Kotetsu Yamamoto. Yamamoto, who after retiring as an active wrestler in 1980, was a TV announcer, referee and trainer with the company, starting out the match as a referee, along with Katsuhisa Shibata (former wrestler and later referee; father of current New Japan wrestler Makai Club IV). During the match, Yamamoto switched from referee to wrestler, and it ended with he and 59-year-old Kantaro Hoshino, the two oldest wrestlers in the match, as the final two left, after eliminating Kuniaki Kobayashi (an 80s star best known for his feud with the original Tiger Mask). The two were a tag team in the late 60s called the Yamaha Brothers, so it was basically the idea that the Yamaha Brothers won the match. Also appearing in the Battle Royal, in order of elimination, were George Takano (an 80s junior heavyweight star as The Cobra), Masashi Aoyagi (who still wrestles for NOAH), Great Kabuki (major 80s star in the U.S. and Japan), Kengo Kimura (who just retired a few weeks ago), Osamu Kido (who retired a few years back) and Haruka Eigen (who still wrestles for NOAH). From a wrestling standpoint, as you can imagine both given the names and ages of the names, and the fact Japanese Battle Royals are always terrible anyway, it was awful, but the people watching had great respect and loved seeing the old-timers so it got over great.

We should have a more detailed report on the show in the next week or two, after getting the videotape.

1. Hiroyoshi Tenzan pinned Hiroshi Tanahashi in 10:24 in a match where the winner would get a title shot at the winner of the Takayama-Nagata main event. Match didn't have much heat but the work itself was said to have been really good. Tenzan won with the Tenzan driver.
2. Ken Shamrock beat Takashi Iizuka in 11:44 with the ankle lock submission. Unlike the opener, they worked this match in the worked shoot style with very stiff punches and kicks and lots of fast moving submissions. Iizuka made a great opponent for Shamrock in this style and they had a very good match.
3. Jushin Liger & Koji Kanemoto retained the IWGP jr. tag titles over Tiger Mask & The Heat in 19:50. Very entertaining match as all four looked great combining many different styles of pro wrestling. The jr. heavy matches traditionally don't get a big reaction from Dome crowds, but this was said to be in the ****1/2 range. Finish saw Kanemoto pin Heat after a Tiger suplex. The

significance is he used Tiger's finisher, so they are building for a Tiger Mask vs. Kanemoto IWGP jr. title rematch. Kotaro Suzuki and Naomichi Marufuji from NOAH were at ringside and came into the ring after the match. Liger was taunting them so they'll probably be going somewhere with that again. That was one of the best feuds in wrestling in 2002 and Marufuji missed it with his knee injury.

4. Lyoto (Lyoto Machida) defeated Kengo (Kengo Watanabe) via unanimous decision after three rounds (15:00) of a shoot match. Lyoto is Inoki's personal protégé, as he is a Japanese born, Brazilian raised high school sports star (like Inoki was in the late 50s). Match was said to be boring and with no heat. Even though Lyoto won his debut on the big stage, he didn't impress anyone and Kengo did little on offense either. Lyoto had better positioning in the first round with a takedown and getting the mount. Kengo escaped later in the round. Lyoto got a yellow card early in the second round for an accidental low knee. Kengo got the takedown but Lyoto went for an armbar from the bottom. Lyoto managed a reversal, and even got the mount and threw some punches and Kengo was in trouble when the bell rang. Lyoto got the takedown in round three and controlled the position until the end of the fight, but didn't do significant damage.

5. Tsuyoshi Kosaka beat Sumiazabazar Dolgolsuren in 2:58 in the second Vale Tudo rules match. Dolgolsuren, who is a powerhouse at 264.1 pounds and a national champion in both freestyle wrestling and sumo in Mongolia, lost to Kurt Angle in the 1996 Olympics. He had a weight and power edge on Kosaka, who bulked up to 237.8 to try and compete for power. Dolgolsuren's two brothers are famous already in Japan, New Japan's Blue Wolf, and the biggest current sumo star in the country, Asashoryu. Asashoryu, as well as his parents from Mongolia, were at ringside. Dolgolsuren took Kosaka down once, but Kosaka neutralized him with his guard. After a stand-up, Dolgolsuren went for another tackle and they went through the ropes to the floor, with Kosaka's bodyweight landing on Dolgolsuren's arm as the elbow cracked on the floor. The doctor checked his arm, and thought his elbow was either broken or dislocated and the match was stopped. Although Kosaka was the clear favorite because of his experience in this form of fighting, everyone was hoping for Dolgolsuren to get over by doing some powerful throws before losing. This made it the second straight disappointing match.

6. Shinsuke Nakamura beat Jan Nortje in 3:12 of the second round (8:12). Nakamura, who trained for the fight in San Jose under coach Brian Johnston, came in at 227.7 pounds to 321.0 for Nortje. Nortje came out fast and connected with a knee to the head before Nakamura could take him down. Nakamura has one of the smoothest takedowns of anyone in the Vale Tudo world. Nakamura threw punches and knees from the top and the crowd was going nuts for every blow, since he was the smaller Japanese rookie against the giant experienced foreigner. Nakamura went for an armbar once, causing him to lose his position and Nortje got up. Nakamura took him down again and was going for an armbar when the bell rang. In the second round, Nakamura took Nortje down once again and started nailing him with knees to the head before catching the guillotine choke. This was a big deal for the company because it guaranteed they got something out of these Vale Tudo matches as they made a young star. Within the company, the idea is now to groom Nakamura, slowly, for a Nagata-level role as they think he

has similar potential as a worker but the shoot wins will make him a bigger star (that I agree with because Nagata never quite made it as big as his work should have made him because people never believed he could beat a top-flight guy).

7. Josh Barnett beat Jimmy Ambriz in 3:05. Barnett came in at 221.0 pounds, trimmed way down from the 245-255 he previously fought at. Ambriz, who has bench pressed more than 660 in competition and was billed in Japan as having done a 745 bench in training, was down to 294.9, obviously figuring he had to drop weight because stamina would be his enemy. Barnett came out waving a New Japan flag to be a babyface. However, he hasn't been with the company long enough and nobody knows Ambriz, so the crowd didn't care about this match, just seeing it as two unknown Americans fighting each other. Ambriz took Barnett down, but Barnett neutralized him in the guard. After a stand-up, Barnett started using his boxing and Ambriz was going to be in trouble. He landed a left, which put Ambriz on the deck, and jumped on him with more punches before the match was stopped.

8. Kazuyuki Fujita beat Manabu Nakanishi in 1:09 of the third round (11:09) in the first Vale Tudo match of the 37-year-old Nakanishi's life. The result was largely expected, as Fujita has only lost twice, both to Mirko Cro Cop. Fujita came in at 251.9 while Nakanishi was 264.1. Nakanishi went in way too heavy for his frame for this kind of fighting, even though he isn't fat. Fedor Emelianenko, who faces Fujita on the 6/8 Pride show in the main event, was at ringside for the match. Since Nakanishi hasn't wrestled since 1992 (he went to the Olympics that year so from a qualifications standpoint he's better than Fujita, but Fujita has remained an active fighter and was a hopeful for those same Olympics), Fujita figured he could just avoid the takedown and beat on him standing. This is totally different than any of Fujita's previous matches. In the first round, Fujita pounded on him, and bloodied Nakanishi's nose. They checked his nose, but continued the match. Fujita managed to take Nakanishi down, but Nakanishi escaped right away. By this point Nakanishi's nose was bleeding badly. Nakanishi kept trying to take Fujita down, but wasn't able to. Second round saw them exchange, but Fujita again got the better of him. Nakanishi got a few punches of his own late in the round, but clearly another Fujita round. In the third round, Fujita took Nakanishi down and started throwing punches and knees, one after the other, until the ref stopped the match. New Japan kind of had the no lose deal here, in that at least Nakanishi lost to another pro wrestler and they can do a pro wrestling rematch. But it was still a bad idea because Nakanishi is believed by fans to be the toughest of the New Japan full-time stars, so there was no point in risking that rep in a shoot match that he was a heavy underdog in.

9. Enson Inoue beat Kazunari Murakami in 6:33 of a worked match, even though both have extensive shoot match experience. Murakami apparently did a great job, since it was Inoue's first worked singles match, and he was clearly being hidden in his earlier matches. They just did very stiff standing exchanges. Murakami ended up attacked outside the ring by Michiyoshi Ohara and Tatsutoshi Goto, and juiced heavily. Inoue was pounding on him again when the referee stopped the match. This was said to have been very exciting with a lot of heat.

10. Kenta Kobashi retained the GHC title over Masahiro Chono in 28:27. Said by some to be the

best match of the show (the other match that had support as the best match was the jr. tag title match) but others said it was slow for the first third and while a good match, Chono couldn't do much because of his injury. The storyline was that both men showed sportsmanship as neither would attack the other's bad knee (which I guess says the Chono injury is legit since they didn't work it into the match). Chono, torn knee and all, even did a tope. Match was slow, given Chono's condition and how long they were going. But the crowd popped for everything they did. Usually when people from other promotions come in on New Japan shows, they are given an outsider almost heelish reaction, but everyone loved Kobashi. Chono was hobbling and wearing a heavy brace on his left knee. Chono used moves like a back suplex, his Yakuza kick, a dropkick, and both the STF and a chicken wing facelock for attempted finishes. Kobashi came back at the end delivering six different half nelson German suplexes on Chono (who has had a bad neck for 11 years) and Chono kept kicking out until Kobashi hit a lariat for the pin. The two hugged after the match.

11. Yoshihiro Takayama (NWF champion) defeated Yuji Nagata (IWGP champion) to become a double champion in 18:17. Basically this was saying that Inoki's world title (the NWF belt was New Japan's main belt in the 70s when Inoki dominated it) was bigger than the IWGP belt (which has been the main singles title since 1983). This match was one year to the day of their Tokyo Dome match where Nagata beat Takayama, that was voted in *Tokyo Sports* as last year's Match of the Year. This was said to have been as good, if not better, since it was longer. Nagata looked like just about the best wrestler in the world in the ring and Takayama kept up with him. Almost as heated as the previous bout. Takayama got control toward the finish throwing his trademark world stiffest pro wrestling style kneelifts (who would have thought in 2003 that Mr. Wrestling II's finisher would turn out to be more of a legit move than almost all the other finishing moves of the 70s?). He threw a knee to the jaw (which ended several of the matches on the last Pride show) and got the pin after a German suplex. Hisashi Shinma, who was the booker and CEO of New Japan in its building days (through 1983), said that Takayama proved the NWF title was stronger than the IWGP title. This was an angle alert for Tenzan to show up and say that he and all the wrestlers of New Japan consider the IWGP belt as the most important title in wrestling, and challenged Takayama to a title match. The two had a pull-apart in the ring to end the show to build for their match on 6/13 at Budokan Hall. After the match, Takayama said he wanted to defend the title against Chono to avenge his loss in last year's G-1 Climax tournament finals.

OCTOBER 13, 2003

The return of Hulk Hogan to Japan, and his impending debut with TNA, may cause major potential waves throughout the industry.

Hogan had his first match in Japan in nearly ten years on New Japan's 10/13 show at the Tokyo Dome. After the match, he shot an angle with Jeff Jarrett for TNA's biggest event in history, scheduled for 11/30. A third player involved is boxing promoter Murad Muhammad, and his attempt to pitch a combined two-hour wrestling/boxing television series based on Hogan being the big star. There is also a lot of intermixing with these three groups, two of which are

struggling and the third of which doesn't even exist.

Hogan came to Japan several days early to promote his appearance, and was claiming that he's done with WWE and Vince McMahon for good. He said he wants to start a new career in New Japan, which was the company that made Hogan into a huge television celebrity, a year before he clicked as a big draw in the AWA and many years before he became a national celebrity in the U.S. They did an angle where Masahiro Chono said that if Hogan beat him, he'd give up power as booker. That angle was a semi-shoot, as New Japan had approached Hogan with the proposal to make him booker in exchange for more frequent visits. Hogan wanted to test the waters in Japan on this show before committing to anything, but has been pushing his own angle to get Antonio Inoki out of retirement for the 1/4 Tokyo Dome show. While Inoki (who turns 61 in February) coming out of retirement will be a huge deal once, since he hasn't wrestled since his big retirement show in 1998, doing a singles match would serve no purpose long-term for a company that needs to make its full-time stars bigger mainstream names. Probably the best idea is for a tag match where Hogan would team with a New Japan wrestler (Chono makes the most sense storyline-wise and would be the best mainstream because of his name for a dream match slot. Hiroyoshi Tenzan is the guy being groomed now who could use the rub, although Tenzan should be IWGP champion and may be better off in a title defense) against Inoki & Yoshihiro Takayama (or Bob Sapp, if they can get him). Among the ideas battled around for Japan is a Hogan retirement countdown, similar to what Antonio Inoki did in the 90s on big shows, as did Atsushi Onita, both successfully. It would reprise perhaps the most successful angle from the bitter days of the early 80s television wrestling war between All Japan and New Japan, something Hogan would know well since it was during his Japanese heyday. New Japan was well ahead in popularity when it caught fire in late 1982 when Riki Choshu made his turn on New Japan. But while All Japan couldn't surpass New Japan, its business made a huge comeback in 1982-83 based on a build-up to the retirement of Terry Funk, with farewell events in every city. *Tokyo Sports* had a fan poll of what current wrestler they would like to see against Hogan, and the top six, in order, Takayama, Keiji Muto, Mitsuharu Misawa, Kenta Kobashi, Genichiro Tenryu and Naoya Ogawa. Of those, the way politics are right now, Takayama is the only one likely to be programmed with him. A similar poll, when asking of anyone in history, who they would like to see Hogan against, the top five finishers were Inoki, Stan Hansen, Vince McMahon, Andre the Giant and Tenryu.

The funny thing is, almost nobody in wrestling believes that Wrestlemania XX will exist without Hogan, but none of this can happen if he goes back for that show, which he is denying to everyone that he has any interest of doing. Hogan pulling out won't significantly damage New Japan. It would make TNA's attempt at a big show into a waste long-term. And it would kill the Muhammad project with Jimmy Hart, which is dependent on Hogan signing a deal and making a long-term commitment. Jarrett is looking for a working agreement with New Japan, both as a way to get his company and his wrestlers under contract more income and work, since New Japan in the past has paid significant money to companies like WWF in the early 80s, World Class in the mid-80s and WCW on-and-off in the 90s as booking fees for talent. The idea that New Japan is willing to do business with TNA is shown because they are sending Tiger Mask to

the TNA 11/30 PPV show. Where Hart and Jarrett, who have spent a lot of time together of late, can benefit is that, despite rumors to the contrary, there has been no major television interest in Jarrett's product. There is a good chance, the way TNA is budgeted, that if it could get a good outlet for weekly television where the station at least pays the production costs or goes in as a business partner, that, combined with ancillary revenue, because they do keep costs low, it could become a profitable long-term business and a significant minor alternative to WWE.

This led to what happened on 10/13, where Hogan pinned Chono. Backstage, while doing an interview, Hogan talked about how his new goal in wrestling was to win both the IWGP and NWA world titles (IWGP being the first world title he ever won, the NWA title being the main belt he saw during his childhood in Florida that he never won). At that point, Jarrett (and this would have been much better if Jarrett had already won the NWA title), clocked Hogan over the head with a guitar. Hogan juiced heavy while Jarrett continued the beatdown. Chono ended up making the save. This incident was scheduled to air on the 10/15 TNA PPV to start the Hogan vs. Jarrett build.

If any of this becomes viable, the person in the catbird seat would eventually be Bill Goldberg, who is the biggest name who would become a free agent at the end of March, and right now it is very much up in the air if WWE and him are both interested in working out a new deal. To mainstream TV programmers, Goldberg would probably be the third or fourth most recognizable name behind Rock, Hogan and maybe Austin. If someone would be interested in televising wrestling, a Hogan/Goldberg combination as top stars would be potent, but with wrestling having the stigma of being yesterday's fad, the mentality of TV programmers is to run like hell from yesterday and copy today. Plus it's a chicken-egg deal, as big money players are only going to commit when they believe the financing and TV are in place. TV and major financing is only going to commit when the talent is locked up. It is cost prohibitive to do one without the guarantee of the other.

For Hogan, who plays every end and is notorious for being perhaps the smoothest as a maneuverer of anyone in modern wrestling history, all of this makes him valuable to McMahon once again. Indeed, some of the best manipulators in the history of the business in the past few days have commented that nobody in history has ever played the real game of wrestling close to as well as Hogan. This is after McMahon swore he'd never use him again as an in ring talent (not the first time in history that has happened). This came after Hogan walked out on their singles program in June and refused to do a key job for Brock Lesnar at last year's Survivor Series, causing last minute booking changes (paving the way for Big Show's push on Smackdown, which saved his career). Hogan also wanted another run with the title and to be used as Hulk Hogan used to be used. McMahon didn't want to push him as a superman world champion, feeling he was too old to beat his top guns in big matches because of the credibility issue.

New Japan's final Tokyo Dome event of the year, "Ultimate Crush II" on 10/13, was internally considered a success even with the smallest crowd ever to attend a New Japan Tokyo Dome event.

An announced crowd of 47,000 (real attendance was said to be 27,000) for the five-plus-hour show, had a legitimate excuse. The advance was solid, as both the high-end and low-end tickets were sold out ahead of time. New Japan's Dome shows traditionally draw huge walk-ups. However, there was a huge rainstorm, which resulted in train service being stopped for part of the day. Virtually all fans who attend the Dome shows come via public transportation, and the shutdown and weather killed the walk-up, not to mention that most people were soaked from head-to-toe when they got into the building.

But while they considered it a success because fans loved the last two matches, looking closer, it wasn't a good sign. Fans weren't into the younger New Japan wrestlers or the company's internal angles. Fans didn't enjoy the shoot matches either. It has become clear the worked shoot style, which was hot at one point, has run its course except on special occasions where it's called for. Shoot matches themselves did work on the last show, but only when they involved personalities the fans cared about, like the Shinsuke Nakamura win over Jan Nortje and the Manabu Nakanishi vs. Kazuyuki Fujita match. On this show, two of the shoot matches had no interest, either from a personality standpoint or a storyline standpoint, at all. And looking at the next big show on 11/3 at the Yokohama Arena, it seems they aren't learning from this.

What got over was the Hogan vs. Chono dream match, which was the first time the two legends had ever faced one another, as Hogan's glory days in Japan ended shortly after Chono broke in as a rookie in late 1984, and Inoki's team against New Japan, which saw Bob Sapp go almost 40 minutes. Because of that, 64% in a national newspaper poll said they liked the show.

As he left Japan the next day, Antonio Inoki told the press that he was dissatisfied with the quality of the show and the attendance, and that the main event didn't have the same excitement as the elimination matches of the 80s. He said that while Hogan's match got over great, he wasn't impressed and said it was so bad he left the arena after seeing the match. Most of this is an angle as Inoki leads the anti-New Japan shooter group, but did say if the 11/3 show doesn't do well, and it's got a bad line-up, that Tatsumi Fujinami (New Japan president) would be in trouble. There are people who were very close to Inoki a few years back who try and explain his vision that has been killing New Japan, taking it in a direction fans don't want for several years, saying he believes pro wrestling is done as a big deal industry and MMA is the future. His booking of MMA people into pro wrestling and having them go over the top New Japan stars is a way to transfer those fans into following MMA because it's the real fighters. The problem with this, is that while there is a huge crossover in Japan, at this point, what people like most about pro wrestling can't be duplicated by MMA, and it is that part of pro wrestling that New Japan is losing. Fans were disappointed because Inoki, although he was at the show, never came from backstage. When the main event started, his music played for Team Inoki and the place went nuts, and it was a letdown when Inoki didn't come out to coach his team. The public explanation for Inoki not being there is he had a pressing business appointment.

1. Jado (Shoji Akiyoshi) won the IWGP jr. title in an 11-man Royal Rumble in 22:47. It started with Masahito Kakihara and Masayuki Naruse. After 2:00, El Samurai came in. Next in were Jushin Liger, Jado and Gedo. A masked man came in, billed as the secret entrant, which turned

out to be Dick Togo with bleached hair. Togo pinned Naruse and Kakiyama was eliminated. Heat came in and eliminated Samurai. Liger then pinned Heat. It's time for him to drop his gimmick and for Minoru Tanaka to come back. Koji Kanemoto was next in, followed by Tiger Mask. Katsushi Takemura jumped Tiger Mask as he was coming in. Gedo, Jado and Takemura all worked over Tiger Mask. Gedo and Liger were next out, while Tiger Mask pinned Takemura. Togo and Tiger Mask were next out, leaving Kanemoto vs. Jado. Kanemoto caught Jado in the ankle lock, but Gedo and Takemura broke it up and Jado caught Kanemoto in a crossface for the submission and title.

2. Blue Wolf pinned Yutaka Yoshie to earn a title shot at Hiroshi Tanahashi's Under-30 championship in 10:01 after a jackhammer.

3. Toa the Samoan Beast pinned Shinya Makabe in 5:40 with a move similar to John Cena's FU. Toa, a 295-pounder, was given a big push since he knocked out Manabu Nakanishi in a K-1 match, so had to be put over to build for a Nakanishi match under pro wrestling rules. Toa has had limited pro wrestling training, and under the circumstances, was said to have done okay, but this was hardly a good match. After the match, Toa challenged anyone. Wataru Inoue accepted the challenge first, but then Enson Inoue (Nakanishi's Vale Tudo training partner) attacked Toa and got him in a choke.

4. Tadao Yasuda pinned Osamu Nishimura in 4:45. The gimmick was that Yasuda had Kantaro Hoshino in his corner and Nishimura had Kotetsu Yamamoto. Hoshino & Yamamoto were a popular junior heavyweight tag team about 30 years ago as The Yamaha Brothers. Nishimura is doing a gimmick where he's trying to get Yasuda quit the Makai Club, turn babyface and join his Muga Group that does 70s Dory Funk Jr. style pro wrestling. The Makai Club kept saving Yasuda. Finish saw Nishimura get a spinning toe hold, and then, a figure four, when Ryota Chikuzen did a splash off the top rope on Nishimura. Hoshino attacked Nishimura as well, causing Yamamoto to go after him with a kendo stick. Chikuzen used a piledriver on Nishimura, and Yasuda did a German suplex, and then arrogantly got the pin by standing on him with one foot.

5. Osami Shibuya (Pancrase) beat Khaliun Boldbaatar of Mongolia (supposedly a place winner in the Olympics twice in judo, but if he was in the Olympics, he never placed) in 4:46 of the second round with a choke. Crowd was dead for this match, even though people into Pancrase liked it, treating it like it was an extended intermission.

6. Tsuyoshi Kosaka won a three-round unanimous decision over Ricardon (6-8, 275 pound Brazilian monster Ricardo Morais). This was a boring match that got no reaction even though everyone knows Kosaka and Ricardon has a great monster look.

7. Josh Barnett retained the King of Pancrase open weight championship, by beating heavyweight champ Yoshiki Takahashi in 2:52 of the second round with a triangle choke. Barnett came to the ring again with a New Japan banner. They are trying to get over that Barnett represents New Japan in these shoot matches in a war with Pancrase, but since Barnett isn't Japanese, it hasn't really clicked. All Japan's Kendo Kashin was in Takahashi's corner. This

was the best of the three and had so-so crowd reactions.

8. Kazunari Murakami beat Katsuyori Shibata in 4:58. Shibata jumped Murakami at the bell. After Murakami threw Shibata out of the ring, the Makai Club all attacked him. Shibata was posted and bled a ridiculous amount, to the point the photographers at ringside were getting their clothes stained by his blood. The match ended when Murakami was pounding Shibata from the mount position and the ref stopped it.

9. Hulk Hogan pinned Masahiro Chono in 18:40 with the axe bomber, a funky lariat that was Hogan's winning move in WWF during his first tenure (called the "Hogan hammer" when he was managed by Fred Blassie) and in New Japan before he discovered the leg drop in the AWA. The crowd went nuts for this match, particularly seeing Hogan, who was managed by Hart. Brian Knobs also came with them, although he didn't appear before the crowd. Hogan used a chair when they went outside the ring and worked over Chono's bad knee. Chono kicked out of the leg drop. Chono used a choke and two flying shoulderblocks off the top rope. The big spot was Chono being thrown from the ring, and when he got up on the apron, Hogan ran at him with the axe bomber, knocking him from the apron to the floor. This is a scene that every fan in Japan has seen a million times, as one of the most famous shoot angles in history was Hogan doing that to Inoki on June 2, 1983 at Sumo Hall in the finals of the tournament to crown the first IWGP champion. Inoki sold it like he was near dead, swallowing his tongue, and didn't wrestle for several months (legitimately he was having trouble with diabetes at the time which was killing his stamina). Every major media covered it as if it was a shoot, that Inoki was knocked out from the bump off the apron. To sell the angle, Hogan didn't seem pleased that he'd even won the title. Anyway, Chono beat the 20 count back into the ring, and launched his final comeback, using an STF. The crowd was chanting "Hogan, Hogan," instead of for Chono to win. Hogan then did his Hulk up routine and finished Chono off with the second axe bomber. I was also told this doesn't hold up to more than ** in repeat viewings.

10. Team Inoki's shooters (without Antonio Inoki), of Bob Sapp & Yoshihiro Takayama & Kazuyuki Fujita & Minoru Suzuki & Shinsuke Nakamura won an elimination match over Team New Japan (with Kenji & Yukio Sakaguchi as managers at ringside), of Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Yuji Nagata & Manabu Nakanishi & Hiroshi Tanahashi & Seiji Sakaguchi in 39:54. The rules wound up being a ten-man tag team elimination match, but they weakened it by allowing over knocking people out of the ring as eliminations. Sakaguchi challenged Sapp to wear a gi brought to the ring by the Sakaguchi family. Sapp did, and put over the 61-year-old Sakaguchi, who took him over twice with judo throws. Crowd went wild for this spot. Takayama tagged in and did a number on Sakaguchi, working over his bad ribs. They tried to put the focus on the younger guys, as rookie Nakamura knocked Sakaguchi out of the ring, as he rolled under the ropes in 3:45, to eliminate him. Nakanishi pinned Nakamura in 14:47 with a German suplex to tie it up. A huge surprise was Tanahashi (again trying to put over the young guys), pinning Fujita in 21:49 with a schoolboy. The focus next was on Tenzan and Takayama, to build for their 11/3 IWGP title match at the Yokohama Arena. Sapp went to hit Tenzan with a Goldberg spear, but Tenzan got Takayama in the way and Sapp nailed both, and they went over the top to be eliminated in 27:53. The focus was next on Sapp vs. Nakanishi, building from their singles

match one year ago (Sapp's first New Japan bout). Sapp ended up spearing Nakanishi over the top in 29:36. This left a tag match with Suzuki & Sapp vs. Nagata & Tanahashi. Tanahashi apparently got a big reaction by making the final four and getting offense on Sapp, before Sapp finally came back and pinned him in 33:16 with a power bomb. This left Nagata against both men. Nagata was nearly finished by a Suzuki choke, but Nagata refused to tap. This was apparently dramatic as Suzuki screamed at Nagata to tap and screamed at the ref to stop it before he kills him, but the ref wouldn't stop it and Nagata wouldn't tap. Nagata made a comeback, until being put down by a Sapp power bomb. Suzuki then put Nagata in Inoki's famous octopus submission. The deal was that Nagata finally passed out from the pain, but never tapped, and the ref stopped the match. Said to be very good, except Sapp is very green and he really didn't appear to understand the rules and what was going on.

JANUARY 4, 2004

The second major head-to-head battle in Japan in five days took place when the traditional New Japan Tokyo Dome show on 1/4 went head-to-head with the combination Pride and Zero-One "Hustle I" show at the Saitama Super Arena.

The results were a blow-out. New Japan announced a sellout 53,000, although the real attendance was closer to 40,000. It was significantly up from the 30,000 of last year's show. It wasn't the almost automatic sellout that the company would do on this date in its glory days, but those days are over. It was well above what the company was expecting, since the show got nowhere near the usual hype as a major event because of the three shows on 12/31.

However, the main event for the show was almost all for naught. The idea was continue the super push of 23-year-old rookie Shinsuke Nakamura, as he unified the company's world title, in the IWGP vs. NWF title match against Yoshihiro Takayama. Nakamura, working with a broken nose and a broken orbital bone in his right eye, which was blackened, retained his IWGP title and won the NWF belt (and eliminated the belt after one year) beating Takayama via submission with a shoulder lock.

Although Nakamura was briefly hospitalized after his 12/31 match with K-1 star Alexey Ignashov, he didn't have his eye examined since he didn't want to miss main eventing the traditional biggest pro wrestling show of the year in Japan.

However, after being examined on 1/5, the broken orbital bone was diagnosed and he was ordered out of action for an indefinite period of time. New Japan made a ruling similar to both UFC and Pride over the past year, and that is that Nakamura is not being stripped of the IWGP title, but they are creating a new champion because of uncertainty of his return.

On 1/6, New Japan announced the new champ, which will be called the provisional champion (similar to the title Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira won on 11/9 when champ Fedor Emelianenko was injured; or the one Randy Couture won beating Chuck Liddell, when Tito Ortiz refused to sign for the fight) will be decided in an eight-man one-night tournament on 2/15 at Sumo Hall in Tokyo. Whenever Nakamura can return, he will face the holder of that belt to unify the title.

Climax winners. Six of the eight names are Takayama, Genichiro Tenryu, Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Masahiro Chono, Yuji Nagata, Tadao Yasuda and Genichiro Tenryu. They've already announced an attempt to get Kazuyuki Fujita. Using that criteria, the other people who could be picked from would be Scott Norton (not on this tour so likely not appearing), Kensuke Sasaki (although the company said on 1/7 it would no longer use him) and Manabu Nakanishi.

Hustle I announced 23,237, but the real figure was closer to 12,000, and it was mostly a dead show. It was a huge mistake for Pride to run the same building five days after a sellout show. Even that smaller number was heavily papered, as every editor and writer of every magazine and sports paper was given 40 tickets to give out to friends. The paid was so small they only opened one gate at the building, and made everybody switch their tickets so the entire crowd was bunched into one section facing the TV cameras. Another sign that the crowd was heavily papered was that a lot of fans left during intermission, and more fans were leaving just prior to the start of the Toshiaki Kawada vs. Mark Coleman semifinal (which was said to be the best match on the show), and Japanese pro wrestling fans never leave before the main event. Zero-One, on a much smaller budget and with far less in the way of hype and angles, drew a lot more paid for its 12/14 PPV at Sumo Hall based around Japanese vs. Japanese matches with Shinya Hashimoto vs. Riki Choshu (which, due to Choshu's injury, turned into a gang war) and Naoya Ogawa vs. Toshiaki Kawada.

People hated the show, which was compared to the K-1/All Japan Wrestle I show from last year, one of the worst major shows of all-time. This wasn't that bad, but had a lot of elements fans didn't like. The show was built around an Ogawa vs. Bill Goldberg main event, which sounded tough on paper because of their contrasting style and each's limitations at the others style. It was better than expected, with Goldberg using a lot of submissions, but fans hated the finish, which involved outside interference by Giant Silva and Pride's Yuji Shimada playing heel ref heel ref. Shimada took two ref bumps, once missing Goldberg having the match won with a spear, and also missing Ogawa having the match won after an STO. It ended up with Silva interfering and tripping Ogawa as he went for a second STO, and Goldberg using the spear and jackhammer. Nobuhiko Takada ran in to get Shimada, who the way it was acted, made it clear he recovered "too fast" when Goldberg was on top and quickly counted the fall in 12:49.

Hashimoto hit the ring and attacked Takada. Takada, who earlier in the show was eating chicken to knock Ogawa, who he had been calling a chicken in the build-up, started taunting Ogawa after losing. Goldberg then went to Hashimoto and told him "You're next." Hashimoto came back with "Next is the finish of you," to set up their singles match on 3/7 at the Yokohama Arena (although there is also now talk of Takada & Goldberg vs. Hashimoto & Ogawa, which would be a far bigger draw, but Takada, 41, has stated he doesn't want to come out of retirement). It appeared they were also building to Ogawa vs. Silva if need be. The obvious problem with the 3/7 date is it's one week before Wrestlemania. While Goldberg could do the date with little problem, it would be difficult, but not impossible, to make it to Raleigh on 3/8, where the final Raw before Mania would be taking place.

Hashimoto wants to continue to do business with Pride because they've got the money to put together big productions like this, and they've scheduled a third date on 5/23. And if Takada

will wrestle, the way they've been building up the angle, they do have a legit money match with Takada vs. Ogawa as a single as well as the tag.

Hustle I aired live on PPV in Japan, and was taped with English speaking announcers Mauro Ranallo and Bas Rutten, either for PPV or DVD distribution.

New Japan's big story was the title unification. The top drawing match on the show was its biggest star of the 90s, Keiji Muto, back from All Japan, to team with Bob Sapp beat Chono, in his first match back after his latest neck injury (which has at least given his bad knee some needed healing time), & Tenzan. The TV in the weeks leading up to the show was pushing the big return to the promotion of Muto, and his teaming with Sapp, as the biggest thing on the show.

The show aired later that night on tape delay on TV-Asahi from 11:25 p.m. to 1:25 a.m., airing the four top matches: Tenryu vs. Nakanishi, Nagata vs. Sasaki, Muto & Sapp vs. Chono & Tenzan and Nakamura vs. Takayama. The show drew a 6.4 rating (6.4 in the Tokyo sector, 8.9 in Osaka and 9.0 in Nagoya), which was considered good for a late Sunday night time slot, but not great. Last year, when the date fell on a Saturday night, the 1/4 special in a late night slot did an 8.8, but that was more a history show running down the greatest 30 matches in company history and airing a few matches from the show, as opposed to airing the card. It is higher than NOAH draws in a similar late Sunday time slot even when it has a huge Budokan main on television, and slightly more than double what a usual NOAH show does.

It was interesting that with the return of Muto and Sasaki, two of the company's biggest stars of its mid-90s boom, the difference in reaction. Muto was seen as a returning hero, even though his walking out of the company and taking Satoshi Kojima, the strongest future star (more charisma than either Yuji Nagata or Hiroyoshi Tenzan, as well as breaking up probably the best tag team in the business at the time in "Tenkoji" with Tenzan) with him, hurt the company. Sasaki, seen as a total heel for leaving for WJ last year, really didn't hurt the company much with his departure.

Complete Tokyo Dome results:

1. Hirooki Goto beat Naofumi Yamamoto in 6:21 with a boston crab.

Current note: Goto appears and his opponent is the current Yoshitatsu.

2. Katsushi Takemura pinned El Samurai in 6:53 after a moonsault. After the match, Takemura got on the mic and challenged Heat for a match for the IWGP jr. title and said in the process, he would unmask Heat.

3. Makai Club I & Ryushi Yanagisawa & Mitsuya Nagai & Ryota Chikuzen beat Enson Inoue & Hiro Saito & Michiyoshi Ohara & Tatsutoshi Goto in 11:55 when Nagai pinned Goto after a springboard knee to the face.

4. Shinya Makabe & Toru Yano beat Blue Wolf & Wataru Inoue in 10:18 when Makabe pinned Inoue after a German suplex.

5. Fresh off the 12/31 show, Masayuki Naruse, who beat his giant opponent Jan Nortje, won via DQ quickly over Tadao Yasuda, who was knocked out by Rene Rooze. Naruse, given a away a ton of size, was dominating when hit with a low blow in 2:09. After recovering, Naruse refused to accept the win. They went at it again, and this time Naruse won with a choke in :30. These matches up to this point were considered like pre-show dark matches, as the traditional start time of the show is 3 p.m., and they started at 1:30 p.m. with the first five bouts.

6. Ryusuke Taguchi pinned Akiya Anzawa in 4:53 after a dropkick. Crowd wasn't into this match.

7. Gedo & Jado beat Tiger Mask & Heat to retain the IWGP jr. tag titles in 17:15 when Gedo pinned Heat after a splash off the top rope. This also puts Gedo in line for a shot at the singles jr. title. Said to be a good match. Takemura then ran in and ripped the mask off Heat and again challenged him to put up his singles jr. title.

8. Jushin Liger pinned Takashi Sugiura to win NOAH's GHC jr. title in 17:52 after a series of brainbusters. KENTA, Yoshinobu Kanemaru and Makoto Hashi all came to the ring with Sugiura. This was said to be a very good physical style of match with both guys pounding on each other, and I was told it was the best match on the show. Sugiura wound up with a minor neck injury. Liger said he would be going to the 1/10 NOAH show at Budokan Hall with the belt. The build-up they are going with for next week is Inoue & Samurai on 1/10 would go to the NOAH show and beat KENTA & Naomichi Marufuji for the jr. titles so New Japan would hold all the NOAH jr. belts.

9. Hiroshi Tanahashi retained the U-30 championship pinning Yutaka Yoshie in 17:06 after three enzuigiris and a dragon suplex in a battle of tag partners. Tanahashi then said he wanted a match with the winner of the Nakamura vs. Takayama unification match. Match was reported as disappointing.

10. Josh Barnett & Takashi Iizuka beat Kazunari Murakami & Katsuyori Shibata in 16:04 when Barnett pinned Murakami after a captured suplex. Murakami worked this, even though he took a real beating from Stefan Leko under K-1 rules five days earlier, and Barnett was bloodied up, even though he ended up beating Semmy Schilt in a grueling match the same night. This was a shoot style match and the crowd liked it.

11. Osamu Nishimura pinned Minoru Suzuki in 9:09 with a backslide in a battle of the company's two technical wrestling stars. There is a style clash, in that Nishimura wrestled a Dory Funk 70s style, doing long matches with more of a dramatic build. Suzuki, who is incredible on the mat, does the fast matwork, but his matches usually don't have any heat. This was billed as a battle of a 70s pinfall master, who does all the cradles, against a 90s submission master. This was said to have been a match in the 70s British style and was very good if you're into that style.

K-1 president Sadaharu Tanigawa came out and announced that the result of the Nakamura vs. Alexey Ignashov match has been changed from a win by Ignashov to a no contest. He said that his referee stopped the match prematurely and apologized, saying he'd like to have a rematch

either on an upcoming K-1 or New Japan show this year.

Next out was Tatsumi Fujinami, in wrestling gear. He challenged Antonio Inoki to come out for a rematch from five days earlier. Inoki appeared on the video screen from the dressing room saying it wasn't going to happen. Inoki told everyone "Happy New Year." It was announced that Fujinami would be undergoing gallstone surgery on 1/6 and Inoki told him to rest up and heal. Fujinami said that he wasn't retiring after Tanahashi asked him for a match.

12. In a surprise, Manabu Nakanishi pinned Genichiro Tenryu in 10:20 after a fisherman suplex. These two pounded on each other, but the match was considered disappointing. Nakanishi pounded on Tenryu's chest raw with chops and brutalized it.

13. Yuji Nagata beat Kensuke Sasaki in 12:10 using Nagata lock III and the ref stopped the match after both juiced. This was a major grudge match and had the most heat of anything on the show. Sasaki worked as a total heel style after the strong negative reaction to his coming back. Sasaki bladed after a chair shot. Sasaki came back and was biting Nagata, who juiced. Nagata made a big comeback to win. After the match, Nagata said he won the match clean and as far as he was concerned, the feud was over.

14. Muto & Sapp beat Chono & Tenzan in 21:00 when Sapp pinned Tenzan after a power bomb. Muto got one of the biggest pops of the show. This was the second most heated match of the show, focusing mainly on the old-time Muto vs. Chono feud. Big pop when Tenzan caught Sapp in the anaconda vise, but Muto saved him. Sapp used a shining wizard, as, of course, did Muto. They look to be building a Sapp vs. Tenzan singles match on an upcoming big show.

Inoki came out with Kazuyuki Fujita, Lyoto, Barnett and Naruse, who all won shoot matches on 12/31. Nobody said anything of importance, just doing the, "Ichi, ni, san, da!" chant.

15. Nakamura, working despite breaking his nose from a knee five days earlier against Ignashov, and sporting a black right eye from his broken orbital bone, , unified the world titles of New Japan once again beating Takayama in 13:55 when Takayama hit his German suplex finisher, but Nakamura scored a reversal and got a shoulder lock for the submission. Takayama dominated Nakamura most of the way, making it appear Nakamura shouldn't have even been in the same ring with him. After the match, Nakamura declared the NWF title dead, saying there was only one world championship and it was the traditional IWGP title.

MAY 3, 2004

New Japan's 5/3 show at the Tokyo Dome didn't look good on paper. And this time, that foretold the night.

What was described as perhaps the company's worst-ever show at the Tokyo Dome, because it was filled with non-wrestlers as the company tried to copy the K-1 freak show approach to drawing casual fans (which may work for TV ratings, but doesn't even work now for K-1 when it comes to selling tickets) they drew an estimated 25,000 fans (announced as 50,000) for a show built around the idea of a New Japan vs. K-1 feud. Given the state of the wrestling industry, they were pleased with the turnout.

During intermission, Katsuhiko Nagata, the younger brother of Yuji, came out and gave a speech about doing his best, as he represents Japan at 163 pounds in the Olympics in Athens in Greco-Roman wrestling. This was right before Antonio Inoki came out with 80s boxing legend Thomas Hearns to do the ichi, ni, san, da! In storyline, they are claiming that Hearns discovered the two latest giants that debuted on the show.

1. American Dragon & Ultimo Dragon & Koji Kanemoto beat Naomichi Marufuji & Heat & Tiger Mask in 18:40 when American Dragon pinned Heat after a leglock suplex. The finish was another move to elevate Bryan Danielson into a top jr. heavyweight role as this new generation version of a Dynamite Kid or Chris Benoit, as he pinned the IWGP jr. champ on one of the year's biggest shows. Even this match, which was the best match on the show, was said to have been disappointing. Marufuji didn't look as good as he does in NOAH and Ultimo Dragon was also a disappointment in his first high-profile match since leaving WWE. American Dragon was said to have been the standout.

2. Super Strong Machine & Giant Machine & New Super Strong Machine beat Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Osamu Nishimura & Shinya Makabe in 7:07. The new members of the Makai Club are Super Strong (Junji Hirata, who had been Makai Club I), Giant (don't know his name, but he had little if any pro wrestling training and was billed as an 8-2 man who was listed in the Guinness Book of Worlds Records as the world's tallest man—the book actually lists at 7-9 guy from Tunisia as the world's tallest living man) & New Super Strong (Mike Jarvi, the 20-year-old 7-foot, 330 pounder trained by Dory Funk Jr. that we wrote about last week, who works as Magnum the Giant on Funk's shows). They company has signed Jarvi to a long-term deal, and he pinned Makabe after a choke slam, leg drop and high elbow drop. They billed New Super Strong as being 7-6, I guess to get over the other guy as an eight-footer. As mentioned last week, he was a basketball player from Detroit who is 7-5, which is where the Hearns connection fits in. Giant Machine was said to be far worse than either Giant Silva or Giant Singh, the last group of New Japan giants that didn't get over. He was described as having a Matt Ghaffari body (think of Dusty Rhodes) and moved very slow and clearly didn't know what he was doing. Funk's protégé was said to have been very green (he's only had seven months of training) but could do a few things. Even though they were working with good people, match was said to be really bad.

3. Jushin Liger beat 16-year-old Katsuhiko Nakajima in 7:27 after a palm blow and a Boston crab. The current deal with Nakajima, who has been groomed since the age of 14 for pro wrestling stardom originally by Riki Choshu, is that he's been unofficially adopted by Kensuke Sasaki and Akira Hokuto. Both were at ringside cheering him on. Nakajima looked like no competition for Liger and it was said to have been a bad match.

4. Josh Barnett beat Ken Shamrock in a worked battle of shoot stars via DQ in 13:13. The story is that Shamrock was the first King of Pancrase champion (actually the first close to a shoot world championship in pro wrestling in probably a century or more), winning a 1994 tournament. He claimed he had to beat four people to win the title, while Barnett won it beating one person (Yuki Kondo last year). They exchanged punches, kicks and submissions, but the report was the match looked more like two guys sparring at half speed in the gym than either an

entertaining pro wrestling match or a stiff shoot style match. Shamrock went heel at the end, refusing to break on the ropes and then hitting the ref. Finish did not go over well. Match was said to have been really bad, with no heat, and when people saw them “sparring,” a lot of people used this match as an intermission. Barnett has improved greatly and Shamrock has looked good in the past, but it didn’t click.

5. In what was billed as Mongolians vs. sumo, Sumiyabazar Dolgolsuren had his first worked match in Japan, teaming with younger brother Blue Wolf (Ceruzibde Dolgolsuren) to beat 70s sumos Genichiro Tenryu & Meng in 8:30. Asashoryu, the brother of the Dolgolsuren’s, who is the biggest sumo star in the world and a major celebrity in Japan, was at ringside during the match. Tenryu attacked both brothers with chair shots. Meng, now 45, had his first match in about two years as he’s been selling cars in Florida. Wolf pinned Meng after a jackhammer slam. Wolf and Tenryu looked good with each other but Sumiyabazar didn’t seem to know how to work at all.

6. Yuji Nagata & Kendo Kashin beat Manabu Nakanishi & Kensuke Sasaki in 14:58. This match saw Nagata work almost the entire match. Kashin kept jumping off the apron when Nagata went to tag him. The New Japan fans turned on Kashin big time. However, at the finish saw Kashin throw powder in Nakanishi’s eyes, and Nagata pinned him after a bridging back suplex.

7. Yoshihiro Takayama & Minoru Suzuki retained the IWGP tag titles beating Masahiro Chono & Kazunari Murakami in 15:50. Suzuki used his choke into an over the top suplex, followed by a piledriver to pin Murakami. Match was said to have been disappointing in that it wasn’t all that exciting. Suzuki worked most of the way but Takayama is the one they wanted to see. Takayama & Suzuki after the match said they wanted contenders to come from other promotions since New Japan had no challenges for them. Well, New Japan books its promotion like WCW booked WCW, as inept against outsiders, and they are headed down the same path.

8. In the first of what was billed as four K-1 vs. New Japan matches in the main event, Yutaka Yoshie over New Japan pinned Jan “The Giant” Nortje, a 6-9 K-1 fighter from South Africa. Nortje dressed up like The Giant Convict, in all stripes, a role that was developed around 1968 for Plowboy Stan Frazier when he was wrestling in Los Angeles. Match only went 3:31, as Nortje is about the worst at pro wrestling as you’d ever see. Yoshie sold for his punches early with some knockdowns. He came back with five spinning backfists, a back suplex, a big splash and finally a camel clutch submission. Said to have been terrible.

9. Hiroshi Tanahashi beat Sean O’Haire in 7:39. They billed O’Haire as a K-1 secret weapon, when the original opponent, Predator, was pulled off the show. O’Haire didn’t look good in his debut and the two had a style clash. He missed a swanton and submitted to the dragon sleeper.

10. Musashi of K-1 beat Katsuyori Shibata in 2:00 of the second round. The rules were three minute rounds, where Shibata would get 20 seconds on the ground to garner a submission if he could get a takedown. They were pushing the idea in the newspapers that K-1 and New Japan were having trouble agreeing to rules and referee. New Japan wanted MMA rules while K-1 wanted only a short period on the ground before stand-ups. I guess the compromise was that

they used those rules, but used a pro wrestling ref. This was the return of long-time ref Massao Hattori, who had left the promotion when Choshu started WJ. Not sure if this was a worked or shoot match (from the description, I'd guess a work, but they were trying to give the impression in the pre-match build-up it would be a shoot). In the first round, Shibata took him down and worked for an armbar and a heel hold, but time ran out on him on the ground. Musashi scored a knockdown with a knee, but Shibata got up at seven. In the second round, Shibata wouldn't break on the ropes. A second ref jumped in and got involved. Musashi claimed he was poked in the eye, and the K-1 people started going crazy. Musashi rushed in with low kicks, kicks to the body and one high kick for the knockout. Musashi's kicks at the end were said to be super stiff. Match was said to have been exciting.

11. Bob Sapp retained the IWGP heavyweight title pinning Shinsuke Nakamura in 12:31 with two Beast Bombs (the power bomb like move he made famous in his shoot match with Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira in 2002). Nakamura got a triangle, but Sapp escaped by picking him up and dropping him like a power bomb. Sapp dropkicked Nakamura out of the ring, and Nakamura barely beat the 20 count back in. Apparently Sapp's dropkick, for his size, was awesome. Overall people were into this match and I was told Sapp is beginning to understand what to do, although a lot of what he does like his brawling looks bad. But people get into his power moves and his shoot style moves. It was Nakamura's job to make Sapp look like a monster here and apparently he succeeded. Nakamura came back with a side suplex and an armbar. Sapp hit a lariat and then got behind with a choke. Nakamura escaped the choke by biting Sapp's fingers. Nakamura tried a guillotine, and then dropped Sapp into a DDT and began punching from the mount. Sapp turned it around and began head-butting down from the mount. Nakamura went for another submission from the bottom, but Sapp powered out with two beast bombs for the pin.

JANUARY 4, 2005

We can officially declare the tradition of New Japan's 1/4 Tokyo Dome event being a special day in the culture and the biggest show of the year to be dead and buried.

This year's Tokon Festival Wrestling World 2005 drew the company's smallest-ever Dome crowd, a heavily papered 25,000 (announced at a ridiculous 46,000), and only 10,000 paid, for the 14th annual event on the day in the Dome for what was until recent years, that country's version of Wrestlemania.

The show was said to be lifeless, with mostly average matches, and it felt like nothing special except the main event really delivered. Long-time New Japan fans left the building really sad to see just how far things had fallen.

When the show started, the building was empty, causing people to think this was going to be a disaster of a major magnitude. By the third match, the place was half full.

The worse part about this is when they realized they couldn't sell tickets, they began giving them away en masse. Tickets moved far slower than for any New Japan event ever in its flagship big show building, due to no major outsiders on the show and a horrible line-up for such a big

building.

They ended up giving away so many tickets that there were actually no tickets available at the ticket office at the Dome, and the major outlets reported only a few locations still available.

What happened is that, like WCW at the end, most of the people given free tickets didn't even bother coming. It wasn't quite TNA giving away 10,000 ticket vouchers to get 1,000 people into Nashville, but it was an apathy level the likes of which nothing the company had ever experienced for a Dome show.

The line-up was weak, without even an IWGP title match on top, and a main event which promised to be a great match with the company's two biggest hopes for future major stardom, Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Shinsuke Nakamura for the U-30 title.

However, that match couldn't sell any tickets before, and they were banking on the Ultimate Royal to interest the casual fans. But after what happened on 12/31, they were unable to get Bob Sapp, Akebono or Don Frye, and were left with a match nobody cared about.

Worse, even though New Japan for the most part didn't seem to like shoot matches on their big shows, the billing of this match as "Ultimate," as in "Ultimate Crush," (the company's term for doing shoot matches) had fans expecting a shoot.

When it was clear within seconds the strange match, where two matches took place in the ring at the same time, was a work, fans crapped all over it.

The match was designed to debut Ron Waterman, who did old-school gimmicks to garner publicity like tearing phone books and bending flying pans, as the new foreign powerhouse, as he destroyed Masayuki Naruse, Manabu Nakanishi and Yuji Nagata in rapid order to win.

1. Gedo & Jado went to a 15:00 draw with Wataru Inoue & Katsushi Takemura. The juniors matches never get over well in the Dome, which was empty at this point. But the work was good, working the Takemura feud after splitting from Gedo & Jado. Takemura had Gedo in a dragon sleeper when the bell sounded.

2. Jushin Liger pinned Koji Kanemoto in 10:30 to earn the next shot at the IWGP jr. title. This was said to be the second best match on the show. Liger used a brainbuster on the floor to set up beating on Kanemoto. Kanemoto several times got Liger in ankle locks. Liger used a backwards superplex and two brainbusters in the ring, but Kanemoto out of nowhere grabbed another ankle lock. Liger reversed the ankle lock into a cradle. After the match, Liger said he wasn't interested in winning the IWGP jr. title again (although he challenges Tiger Mask for it on 2/20 at Sumo Hall), but was more interested in teaming with Nakanishi to challenge Tanahashi & Nakamura for the tag titles.

3. Tiger Mask pinned Heat in 14:17 to win the IWGP jr. title. Tiger opened with a dropkick and a tope that sent Heat into the stands. Heat dominated most of the way, including using his flying armbar, but Tiger made the ropes. Tiger got the pin using a Tiger suplex in another good match.

4. Yuji Nagata beat Katsuhiko Nagata in a 5:00 amateur wrestling exhibition. This was the

younger Nagata's debut, coming off the 2000 and 2004 Olympics. It opened with Katsuhiko getting a few takedowns on his much bigger (70 pounds heavier) brother and people liked seeing that. When Yuji got the advantage, they didn't like it because he was so much bigger. Match was said to be boring and people didn't care. They traded amateur moves, most fans didn't really understand what was happening, and Yuji won, 15-11.

5. Minoru Suzuki beat Takashi Iizuka in 9:45 with a choke in an average match. People weren't into this.

6. Satoshi Kojima pinned Osamu Nishimura in 19:26. Nishimura did all the Dory Funk spots, including the rapid fire elbow drops. He even gave the ref an elbow drop. Kojima came back with lariat after lariat, doing four in a row. As he went for a fifth, Nishimura sidestepped and caught an abdominal stretch, and rolled it into a lateral guillotine for a near fall. Kojima cut up, and hit his strongest lariat of the match for the pin. It was okay, but people were expecting more. It was clear that there was no novelty or special interest at all in Kojima working New Japan dates.

7. The Ultimate Royal went like this. They drew pairings, similar to a Royal Rumble drawing. Four guys would be in the ring at all times, but it wouldn't be a free-for-all, a four-way or a Battle Royal, but it would be two singles matches. As it turned out, the two matches never got in the way of each other, and they were quick matches, worked to look like shoots. It started with Ron Waterman vs. Masayuki Naruse and Manabu Nakanishi vs. Toru Yano. Waterman won first. Naruse used a triangle on him, but Waterman used the Quinton Jackson power bomb to "knock him out," and the ref stopped it after punches from the mount in 2:35. Nakanishi beat Yano at 3:05 with a chicken wing submission. This meant the next matches were Yuji Nagata vs. Blue Wolf and Sumiyabazar Dolgorsuren (Wolf's older brother vs. Mitsuya Nagai. Nagata beat Wolf with an armbar in 5:46. Dolgorsuren used a shoulder lock at 5:49. The next series of matches were the semifinals, with Dolgorsuren vs. Nagata and Nakanishi vs. Waterman. They both ended quickly, as Waterman used a guillotine on Nakanishi in 1:02. Nagata beat Dolgorsuren in 1:53 via punches from the mount. It came down to Nagata vs. Waterman, with Waterman winning in 1:41 with an entangled armlock. This was said to be have been a disaster.

8. Masahiro Chono pinned Riki Choshu in 6:54 with a shining kekka kick, which is his new big finisher. Chono looked good and it was said to be as good as you could expect from these two at this stage.

9. Chono beat IWGP heavyweight champ Hiroyoshi Tenzan in 11:33 with an FTS, which is basically an STF, except to supposedly apply more pressure, Chono rolled to his back so it's a combination STF and upside down Mexican surfboard. The problem is Chono's shoulders are down when doing the move, but I guess that doesn't matter. This sets up yet another Tenzan vs. Chono match, for the title, probably on 2/20 although the date isn't official.

10. Shinsuke Nakamura beat Hiroshi Tanahashi in 26:42 to win the U-30 championship. These guys were put on last to steal the show, and they did. The idea was to make these two guys the Flair and the Steamboat of the company, as the two guys who will be the two biggest stars to

carry them to the next glory period, and this was to be their first of many big meetings. Said to be an incredible athletic match and those who were there were very impressed. Tanahashi even did a dive that cleared the barricade and the ringside table. The show ended with Nakamura winning the title clean by submission with an armbar.

Current note: Back in 2005, New Japan was looking at Tanahashi vs. Nakamura as its Flair vs. Steamboat feud. To a degree, that ended up being a prediction that came to fruition. Yet, New Japan would end up with Tanahashi vs. Okada, which surpassed Flair vs. Steamboat and Tanahashi vs. Nakamura, and then Omega vs. Okada, which took things one step farther than that.

MAY 14, 2005

For Keiji Muto, he said his return to New Japan for the 5/14 show at the Tokyo Dome was a sad day. For Mitsuharu Misawa, he said his third match of his career on the New Japan mat was a chance to relive his childhood.

But even with the biggest star of both All Japan (Muto) and Pro Wrestling NOAH (Misawa), meaning the biggest name from all three of Japan's biggest companies (New Japan's Masahiro Chono would be the biggest name in that company) were represented, the fans spoke the loudest with their disinterest.

Approximately 21,000 fans, (approximately 10,000 paid, almost identical to the disastrous January 4th show) attended the show. A crowd of 35,000 was announced, and the way the building was set up with so many sections blocked off, it didn't look too bad live. Still, New Japan President Masakazu Kusama admitted afterwards it was the smallest crowd in company history for a Tokyo Dome event. He tried to put a happy face on it, saying that while the crowd was a disappointment, they managed to put top stars from the three top groups on one show, and talked of doing another show (rumored to be October if it even happens, as many were noting with what they drew, they really should have held this card at Budokan Hall) as an all-star show with the biggest names from all four groups. The fan reaction to Kusama in Japan is very reminiscent to Jim Herd when he ran WCW, as they have no confidence someone who came in with zero knowledge of the business, coming up with these ideas, will do anything but destroy the company. Even though NOAH is more popular than New Japan right now, New Japan is still, to the general public, what they think of pro wrestling. It going down threatens the business badly.

To show how far the company has fallen, even with Muto and Misawa appearing, TV-Asahi only gave the Dome event a late night 30 minute show in its usual way past midnight time slot, airing just the main event where Hiroyoshi Tenzan pinned Satoshi Kojima to regain the IWGP title for the New Japan promotion. This ended the three-month period where Kojima held the Triple Crown for All Japan and the IWGP title for New Japan at the same time. The biggest match on the show as far as public interest, moved into the semifinal spot just days before the show, where Misawa & Tatsumi Fujinami beat Jushin Liger & Masahiro Chono, will air on 5/21.

There was said to be nothing blow-away on the show, with the main post-show talk regarding

the two big angles.

The first was after Yuji Nagata pinned King of Pancrase superheavyweight champion Tsuyoshi Kosaka in a rematch of a 3/26 PPV match from Sumo Hall that Kosaka had won. Before the match, former New Japan P.R. director and booker Fumihiko Uwai, who has unsuccessfully attempted to get his own pro wrestling promotion started with Akira Maeda (the two have done one MMA show and have a second big show planned for 7/3, and Maeda and Nagata have had words in the press of late), came out in a heel manager like role with Katsuyori Shibata and Kazunari Murakami. Shibata was being pushed as one of the new generation Three Musketeers with Hiroshi Tanahashi & Shinsuke Nakamura, and quit New Japan in January to become the top star for what was at times called Big Mouth Promotions, as well as Wrestle-One. Murakami and Yoshihisa Yamamoto, the veteran star from RINGS and later mostly a well known job guy in Pride, came out as well to do a ten years too late version of the New Japan vs. UWFI type of feud. After Nagata won, Nagata and Yamamoto started yelling at each other. Yamamoto said Nagata was a disgrace to pro wrestling, noting he had lost to both Fedor Emelianenko and Mirko Cro Cop in 1:00. While on the surface, bringing that up sounds incredibly stupid, the people got a rise out of it and were very into the ensuing pull-apart brawl. However, a lot of people thought it was strange, because they figured for maximum effect, Akira Maeda, as the figurehead face of the "outsider promotion," should have been involved in some form in the angle.

Maeda may not have even been at the show. Just as strange was that Antonio Inoki was at the show, but never left his dressing room. Reporters stationed with Inoki said that he watched some of the undercard matches, but then said, "I'm an old man and I have to go home early," and left before the start of the main event.

After Tenzan beat Kojima, in a match where the new heel group of 1992 national amateur wrestling champions turned pro stars (Nagata, Manabu Nakanishi, Kendo Kashin and Kazuyuki Fujita) were at ringside, Fujita came out after Tenzan was presented with the belt. Fujita said that Tenzan didn't impress him and didn't have any Toukon (Inoki) spirit (Fujita is a personal protégé of Inoki) and challenged him to a match at any time. Fujita, who punched out some rookie wrestlers, said he wasn't impressed with Tenzan's fighting style, and the two were about to go at it when Seiji Sakaguchi stepped in between them. It appears the title match may be taking place on a big show in July. Hiroshi Tanahashi, who won the Japan Cup tournament on 4/24 in Osaka, beating Tenzan (in an excellent match) and Nakanishi in succession, was also told by tag partner Shinsuke Nakamura, that he should challenge for the title.

Muto beat Ron Waterman, who New Japan had tried to push as a foreign monster in a few prior appearances. But the match didn't get over, as they had a style clash. Muto said it was really sad for him after wrestling on so many sold out Tokyo Dome events, to come back and see things in this shape. Muto also said he wanted to promote an All Japan show at the Tokyo Dome, which is ridiculous at this point, because they are only doing 5,000 at Sumo Hall. He said he thinks they could outdraw New Japan when Kojima has more time to establish himself as a top champion.

Misawa didn't dwell as much on the negative. He talked more about how it was a childhood dream to be able to team with Tatsumi Fujinami. Fujinami became a big star in Japan as WWF world junior heavyweight champion when Misawa was a 15-year-old high school wrestler, and was one of the biggest stars in Japan of that era. After the match, Fujinami brought up doing a singles match against Misawa, and talked of it happening on a NOAH big show as a return for the favor of appearing here, and Misawa said he'd like to do it. The next day, at the NOAH show at Korakuen Hall, Misawa said when Fujinami gets himself back into top shape, he wants to do the match.

Reports were the show was okay. The early matches came off as rushed, there were a few good matches, but no great matches.

1. Toru Yano & Togi Makabe beat Yutaka Yoshie & Osamu Nishimura in just 5:36 when Yano pinned Nishimura after his nightcap, which is a brainbuster offshoot.
2. Minoru Suzuki pinned Alexander Otsuka in 4:46 after a choke and a Karl Gotch-style piledriver, which is the same move Jerry Lynn used as the cradle piledriver. Both of these guys are well known as pro wrestlers who went into shootfighting.
3. Hirooki Goto & Minoru (Tanaka) won the IWGP jr. tag titles from Koji Kanemoto & Wataru Inoue in 14:42 when Goto pinned Kanemoto after the Canadian Destroyer. The story of the match is Goto worked almost the entire way by himself. The idea was to use his surprise win over Kanemoto to elevate him into stardom. Crowd got into him and saw him as a big deal, plus they loved the finishing move, even though Petey Williams has done it on indie shows in Japan. Goto said he would win the upcoming Best of the Super Juniors tournament, so this was to make people think there is a new fresh contender.
4. Tiger Mask pinned Black Tiger (Rocky Romero) in 9:28 with a Tiger suplex to keep the IWGP jr. title. Before the match started, they aired clips from 1982 with the original Tiger Mask vs. the original Black Tiger (Rollerball Rocco from England). The match was a disappointment, as people didn't buy Romero in the role. The gimmick is apparently already done after one match, as Romero unmasked. What was the point of that?
5. Yuji Nagata pinned King of Pancrase superheavyweight champ Tsuyoshi Kosaka in 8:35 after a bridging back suplex. Said to be really good. Kosaka kept going for a choke, but Nagata always escaped and finally hit a knee to the chin to set up the suplex finisher.
6. Keiji Muto pinned Ron Waterman in 11:16. Both guys were huge. Crowd was really into Muto's return, but didn't care much about it once the bell rang. Muto used a hard shining wizard to bust Waterman's nose, then delivered a dropkick to the knee, and finished him off with a moonsault. Waterman, best known in Japan from his Pride matches, such as a loss to Mirko Cro Cop and a win over Kevin Randleman, got a big push on the Jan. 4 Dome show when he submitted everyone in sight in his win in the Ultimate Rumble.
7. Hiroshi Tanahashi & Shinsuke Nakamura retained the IWGP tag titles beating Kendo Kashin & Manabu Nakanishi in 17:59. Nakanishi & Kashin were managed by former New Japan TV announcer and 60s star Kotetsu Yamamoto. He was at ringside with a kendo stick, and in

typical perplexing fashion, never interfered once. The story here was, Nakanishi & Kashin kept screwing up and hitting each other by accident, so it was played more for comedy. Nakamura won using an armbar for the tap out on Kashin.

8. Mitsuharu Misawa & Tatsumi Fujinami beat Masahiro Chono & Jushin Liger in 14:46. This was the best received match on the show. Misawa got a great pop coming out. Fujinami was said to have gotten a big sympathy pop, as almost as if they understood in this dream match it would embarrass him not to get a reaction like the others. The match was described as everyone doing their signature spots and the fans were happy to see it all. It was mostly Fujinami vs. Liger, so Liger could carry him, and Misawa vs. Chono, playing off their 30:00 draw on May 2, 2002. To show how much things have changed in three years, that match sold the Dome out. Liger didn't wear his normal ring outfit. He wore an outfit with no shirt, because he's got the huge upper body that his ring costume hides, but the feeling is he needed to show his upper body to look big in the ring with the heavyweights. People were into Misawa throwing the really hard elbows. Misawa & Fujinami did a double dropkick to Chono. Chono did a tope to Fujinami. Misawa then did the elbow suicida (tope ending with an elbow smash) on Chono. Finish saw Fujinami gave Liger a superplex off the top rope, and then Misawa followed with a splash ff the top. Fujinami then put Liger in the cobra twist, and then took him down in a lateral guillotine cradle for the pin.

9. Hiroyoshi Tenzan pinned Satoshi Kojima in 19:34 to win the IWGP heavyweight title. In a sense, after these two had done a 30:00 draw in December followed by a 59:45 match that Kojima won in February, people were expecting another long match. It was a good match, but not as good as people were hoping. Kojima did two Koji cutters for near falls. Tenzan got near falls after a back suplex and a diving head-butt. Kojima got near falls with a Koji cutter off the top rope and a brainbuster. Tenzan went for the anaconda vise twice. Kojima did a rabbit lariat and followed with a piledriver for a near fall. Tenzan came back with his boxing combination blows, which was part of the pre-match story that Tenzan was training in boxing to have an offensive attack that long-time tag partner Kojima wouldn't be familiar with. He went to the body to soften Kojima up, before going to the face. Tenzan then did a moonsault, the Mongolian chop a few times, followed by the Tenzan tombstone driver for the win. After the match, they did the angle with Fujita and Tenzan.

OCTOBER 8, 2005

Brock Lesnar's return to pro wrestling after 18 months away, between football and a court case, wound up with him, as expected, capturing the IWGP heavyweight title in his first match for New Japan Pro Wrestling.

The 28-year-old Lesnar won a three-way over champion Kazuyuki Fujita and G-1 Climax champion Masahiro Chono in the main event of the 10/8 show at the Tokyo Dome, which drew the second smallest crowd for a major fighting event in the history of the building.

Seniors(over 60) and teenagers (17 and under) were admitted free. There was also a last few days 500 yen (\$4.65 U.S.) general admission ticket price, less than the cost of one bottled water

at most Tokyo night clubs. The normal bottom ticket price for the upper deck at the Dome is 3,000 yen (\$28).

Due to just how dead the company is at this point, even with those free and ultra-cheap ticket prices, only about 16,000 fans were in attendance. It was barely enough to fill Budokan Hall or the Yokohama Arena. With all the people allowed in free, the paid was significantly lower, said to be well under 10,000 and the smallest in company history for an event in its traditional super show arena. The only wrestling or fighting event ever at the Tokyo Dome to do worse was the August 8, 2002, UFO show (which in itself was more successful because it drew a big television audience) headlined by Naoya Ogawa vs. 1996 Olympic Greco-Roman wrestling superheavyweight silver medalist Matt Ghaffari, that drew 12,000 total and 5,000 paid.

Lesnar was marketed the past few weeks in Japan as the modern equivalent to the nearly unbeatable 300 pound monster character that was a staple of old school Japanese wrestling. On New Japan TV, they attempted to portray him as the modern version of Andre the Giant, Stan Hansen or Hulk Hogan, showing clips of all three from the heyday of New Japan Pro Wrestling on TV-Asahi in the late 70s and early 80s. Lesnar had a new tattoo on his chest, and was wearing red trunks, as part of a still to be finalized but largely completed legal settlement where the judge basically threw out WWE's claim on its non-compete clause. While terms were not finalized at press time, it is believed Lesnar's side agreed WWE would retain the intellectual property rights on what it had created, such as the term "The next big thing," the black trunks and black boots, and the name F-5 as his finisher. Lesnar is still doing the same move, and pinned Chono in 8:08 to win the three-way with that move, now, as his final slap in the face of WWE after what appears to have been outsmarting the company in negotiations, called "the verdict." He becomes only the fifth American in the 21-year history of the championship, following Hulk Hogan, Big Van Vader, Scott Norton and Bob Sapp. By not directly defeating Fujita, it set the stage for the January 4th show at the Dome to be headlined by Lesnar defending against Fujita.

Lesnar received huge money for the show, to the point that with the smallest live gate New Japan has ever done, the company is believed to have lost money on the deal. The attitude is that they can build Lesnar into a drawing card by having him run through people like the dominant monsters of old, as with no new ideas, the company is mainly trying to copy ideas that worked in the past, but because of it being a totally different climate, likely won't work in the present. Still, they were disappointed that nobody bought tickets to see him, even with all the pub regarding his debut. That's more of a reflection of where New Japan stands right now than if Lesnar can draw, as the feeling is if he was put on a NOAH show against one of its big names, he would be a big draw.

Simon Inoki said he wanted to bring Lesnar back for shows on 10/03 in Kobe, 12/3 in Kyoto, 12/10 in Osaka and 12/11 in Nagoya. Lesnar, when he left Japan after the show, said he hoped they could draw more fans on January 4th when he faces Fujita, and said he was hoping to sign a long-term contract as he has no interest in wrestling for any promotion other than New Japan.

The company's latest desperation move is bringing back Riki Choshu as booker. Choshu, 53, booked the company from July of 1989 through June of 2001, one of the longest successful periods of any booker in wrestling history. During that period, the company grossed more money than any other period in its history. When he was replaced by Masahiro Chono due to business falling off the last several years of his reign, he had booked 24 of the 40 biggest crowds in pro wrestling history, and at the time, he had booked every one of the 16 largest crowds for pro wrestling in Japanese history. By any standards, due to long-term success, Choshu and Vince McMahon have to be considered the greatest bookers in pro wrestling history. Not necessarily the most creative, but there is no argument they were the most effective. Still, times change, and this is an entirely different wrestling business in Japan than it was in 1993, when Choshu booked 70% sellouts over the course of the year, a figure only a few companies in history at their peak can come close to. Although Choshu only won the Best Booker award once, in 1992, by most business standards, New Japan was the No. 1 promotion in the world from 1992 though 1997. The feeling was that he wasn't responding well to criticism, the last two Dome shows he booked didn't draw well, and that Choshu had been unable to create a new star. Choshu also balked at Antonio Inoki's suggestion that Kazuyuki Fujita, coming off high profile shoot wins over Mark Kerr and Ken Shamrock, could be that guy. Choshu had always booked a system where the top guys traded wins and there were multi-tiered superstars, from the legends (himself and Tatsumi Fujinami along with Antonio Inoki in big shows), and the young superstars that would carry the company throughout the year (Shinya Hashimoto, Chono, Keiji Muto, Kensuke Sasaki and Hiroshi Hase), that he largely would get over as climbing the mountain most notably every August in the G-1 Climax tournament.

The news was a shock, as not only was Choshu replaced as booker and no longer popular among the wrestlers, but he was forced out of the company a year later. Choshu wrote his formal resignation letter on April 8, 2002, and left the company on May 31, 2002. The resignation was face saving as he was going to be forced out. Choshu started his own promotion, called WJ, which was a disaster, folding after garnering no interest and producing mostly poor shows. Over the past year, he was running his own smaller shows at Korakuen Hall, under the banner of Riki Promotions. His new deal does allow him to continue running his shows.

Word got out as the company has hit record lows, as the 10/7 house show at Korakuen Hall only drew 885 fans. When wrestlers found out at the show that Choshu, who was working in the opener at the Tokyo Dome, was going to return as booker, wrestlers backstage, most notably Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Yutaka Yoshie and Osamu Nishimura, who hate Choshu, were adamant about uniting the guys against the office on this one. Choshu himself was negative at first about coming back, but eventually was convinced to take the job. For a U.S. comparison, Choshu would be very similar to Dusty Rhodes, in that he was successful in his day (and his day was far longer as a successful booker than Rhodes), but times changed and he hadn't changed with them. Plus, it's tons harder to be successful with the company having shot itself in the foot so much over the past five plus years. It's very much a WCW at the end situation right now. Indeed, those are the comparisons, like the WCW moves of continually bringing back people like Rhodes or Ole Anderson as booker even though it had been years and a different business

at the time they were successful. There was talk of wrestlers forcing the issue, but apparently at the Dome show itself when it was officially announced to everyone, nobody spoke up at the meeting, because they knew it would come across as a sign they were defying Antonio Inoki. Nobody wants to make waves now, because they recognize Choshu was brought in partially to be the bad guy for Antonio and Simon Inoki, as the person who makes the public decisions to cut people. They had a four-and-a-half hour meeting on 10/9, where it was rumored cuts would be announced, but none were. There are rumors about financial problems and an impending restructuring, and the wrestlers know there is nowhere they can go and make what they are currently earning. While nothing was said live in the arena about Choshu, on the television show, they used the term "genba-kantotu" as his new role, which means show director, and said he would be handling the matchmaking, starting with the next tour. Choshu himself has said he doesn't want to wrestle much, and only appear if it's going to mean something.

The January 4th Dome show, apparently the idea of Simon Inoki, is being called "Home Town," with the idea of bringing back all the top stars of the past. More than a few people have seen the timing similarity of this idea and WWE's "Homecoming," show, and saying that's where it came from. The idea is to get Keiji Muto, Satoshi Kojima, Shinjiro Otani, Tatsuhito Takaiwa, Yoshiaki Fujiwara, Masakatsu Funaki, Kensuke Sasaki and even make a play for Akira Maeda (Nobuhiko Takada would likely be politically impossible) and build the show around all of them returning. But there's no box office spark in that, as all but Fujiwara, Funaki and Maeda have worked on New Japan big shows not all that long ago, and at this point, nobody is going to care much about Fujiwara coming back, and it's unlikely Maeda will. Simon Inoki on 10/12 said besides Lesnar vs. Fujita, two other matches he's trying to put together are Choshu vs. Fujinami in a singles match and Funaki's return to traditional pro wrestling after 12 years against Nakamura.

Besides Lesnar, also debuting on 10/8 were Matt Morgan, Mark Jindrak and Charlie Haas. Fans didn't see any of them as stars, although the office thinks they can make Morgan, with his size, into something. They had Morgan beat Yuji Nagata, which is a strong win. Haas & Jindrak lost to Manabu Nakanishi & Kendo Kashin. The description was that Haas and Jindrak came across as AAA-level players, as they had no aura about them, their expressions and how they carried themselves was not nearly major league level, they had no special moves or special look. Haas looked decent in the ring, but people felt he was "weak" when facing the bigger and more powerful looking Nakanishi. Jindrak's offense looked terrible and nobody bought into him, even though he's tall and muscular.

The show aired live in Japan on PPV. Because of the Lesnar name, New Japan is attempting to get the show broadcast in the U.S. as a tape delayed PPV show. This planning also shows that New Japan at least believes the entire non-compete has already been or is about to be thrown out and is just waiting a rubber stamp approval, which would mean Lesnar got a full-fledged victory in the case. I don't know that this is a good strategy, as we've already seen that almost nobody buys PPV shows tape delayed more than a few days nowadays. In the early 90s, there were New Japan tape delayed Tokyo Dome shows that aired on U.S. PPV that did as many as 80,000 buys—as much as many WCW events at the time did. But they were marketed by WCW and featured the top of the line WCW talent performing, and tape delay wasn't a big deal then

because the percentage of viewers who knew it wasn't live was very small, whereas today, everyone will know, and New Japan also doesn't have a television platform in the U.S. to springboard the marketing off the show off.

Reports were this was a thumbs in the middle show, and the three-way main event was said to be $\frac{1}{4}$.

1. Tatsumi Fujinami & Osamu Nishimura beat Riki Choshu & Tomohiro Ishii in 8:37. Choshu is pushing Ishii as the top young babyface in Riki Promotions, so at the time this was booked, it was an interpromotional match-up featuring the revival of the legendary Fujinami vs. Choshu feud. Choshu used his Saito suplex and scorpion deathlock on Fujinami, and also gave Nishimura three lariats, but the finish was Nishimura using the figure four on Ishii.

2. Tatsuhito Takaiwa & Yoshito Sasaki of Zero-One Max beat Koji Kanemoto & Wataru Inoue in 9:03 when Takaiwa pinned Inoue after a lariat, a power bomb and another lariat. Match had solid heat and they worked at building a Kanemoto vs. Sasaki singles match for the Zero-One Max show at Korakuen Hall two days later.

3. Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Yutaka Yoshie & Takashi Iizuka & Naofumi Yamamoto beat Zero-One Max's Shinjiro Otani & Kohei Sato & Ryoji Sai & Kamikaze in 15:05 when Tenzan pinned Kamikaze after a Tenzan tombstone driver. The match also had good heat for the interpromotional aspect, and the wrestlers from both promotions brawled after it was over. Weird to see Tenzan in the third match of the show since he's really the biggest star on the New Japan babyface side that works all the house shows.

4. Hirooki Goto & Minoru (Tanaka) retained the IWGP jr. tag titles beating Negro Casas & Felino (CMLL) in 11:15. They did it Lucha style, and it ended with Goto pinning Casas while Minoru pinned Felino. It was fast-paced, but the match had no heat. Goto ended up with a bloody mouth.

5. Manabu Nakanishi & Kendo Kashin beat Charlie Haas & Mark Jindrak in 9:41. Kashin came out holding All Japan's World and International tag team title belts. It's part of a storyline and a supposed court case. Kashin & Yuji Nagata held the Double tag titles (made up of the old World and International tag team titles) when Kashin left the promotion, and eventually came back to New Japan. He never returned his belts. This was pretty well forgotten about, and they floated stories about All Japan being mad and wanting its belts back. So Kashin rubbed it in their face bringing them to the Tokyo Dome. Said to be a bad match, ending when Nakanishi pinned Haas after the Hercules cutter.

6. Matt Morgan pinned Yuji Nagata in 7:00 with the Mount Morgan drop. Morgan had the early edge, but Nagata came back using lots of kicks as well as a back suplex and an armbar. People got a kick out of the finish. Morgan was more over than Haas or Jindrak.

7. Black Tiger (Rocky Romero) won the IWGP jr. title and retained the NWA jr. title, beating Tiger Mask in 12:01. This whole idea was built on a May 26, 1982, match at Osaka Furitsu Gym, when the original Tiger Mask, as NWA jr. champ, faced WWF jr. champ, the original Black Tiger. In this case, it was the fourth Black Tiger against the fourth Tiger Mask, with both held by 12/27/20, 10:51 AM

stake. Black Tiger scored the pin after a tombstone piledriver. Work was said to have been good, but the crowd wasn't that into the match.

8. IWGP tag champs Hiroshi Tanahashi & Shinsuke Nakamura defeated Toshiaki Kawada & Yoji Anjyo in a non-title match in 18:11 after Tanahashi pinned Anjyo with a dragon suplex. Said to be really good when Kawada was in. Not good at all when Anjyo was in. They looked to be building toward Kawada vs. Tanahashi in a singles match for Jan. 4.

9. Brock Lesnar won a three-way to win the IWGP heavyweight title over Kazuyuki Fujita and Masahiro Chono in 8:08. Lesnar was there mainly to do power moves and get over. Lesnar was managed by his original trainer, Brad Rheingans, and was also seconded by Haas. Fans popped big for him as a major star, and this match was billed as "The New Chapter." To give the match a big sport atmosphere, they played both the U.S. and Japanese national anthems before the show (and no, they don't boo the U.S. national anthem in Japan). It was the first time the title ever changed hands in a three-way. Fujita came out wearing the new belt with the names engraved of all the past champions. At first, both guys attacked Lesnar, but he came back and clotheslined both. Lesnar mostly did power moves on both guys. At one point, Chono put Lesnar down with a Yakuza kick and Fujita started throwing knees from side position. Lesnar rolled out of the ring. Chono nailed Fujita with a flying knee. Lesnar tried "The Verdict" on Chono, but Fujita saved Chono. Lesnar gave Fujita a German suplex. Fujita made a comeback and got Lesnar in a guillotine, but Lesnar powered out and tried The Verdict on him, but Chono kicked Lesnar and threw Fujita out of the ring. Back in the ring, Chono came off the top rope on Fujita, and then nailed him Fujita with a shining kekka kick. Lesnar used a flying tackle on Fujita and was shoulderblocking him in the corner. Fujita moved and Lesnar went into the buckles. Fujita used a German suplex, but Lesnar popped up and hit The Verdict on Fujita, and then on Chono. Antonio Inoki came out after the match to congratulate Lesnar. Lesnar said his main reason for coming to Japan was to win the IWGP title. However, it was said to be really scary and shocking to long-time New Japan fans and those in the company when Inoki came out for his "Ishi-ni-san-da!" chant, which always gets a gigantic reaction, and the people weren't into it at all.

JANUARY 4, 2006

In what could be the end of a tradition, Brock Lesnar used the F-5, now known as the verdict, to pin Shinsuke Nakamura and retain the IWGP heavyweight championship in what possibly could be New Japan's final of 15 straight January 4th shows at the Tokyo Dome.

With the company having been unable to sell more than around 10,000 tickets at the indoor baseball stadium for its past several shows, it had been stated going in that this would be the final show in the building until business picks up. The idea was to hold the big shows at Sumo Hall in Tokyo, which holds 11,066 fans.

Going into the day of the event, there was little evidence that was the wrong decision. Tickets once again moved very slowly for a lackluster line-up, that had little going for it other than for many years, New Japan could sell the building out on what was for years, the unofficial

"Wrestling Day" in the culture and the Japanese version of Wrestlemania.

The death of the tradition is both due to the decline of the company itself, and the six-year-old New Year's Eve tradition taking almost all the major focus away from the event.

However, when the dust cleared, there seemed to be a light at the end of the tunnel, and suddenly there is talk of returning to the building, perhaps on January 4, 2007.

The company papered the entire Tokyo metropolitan area like crazy, but that had been the case for several Dome shows that still didn't draw well. This time, a lot of the freebies came, as there were 31,000 fans in the building (announced as a full house of 43,000), the company's best crowd in the Dome in a while. But the real sign everyone was pointing to was the incredible merchandise business. We don't have figures, but the merchandise was north of \$500,000, probably significantly. The people who got in for free were into spending money on merchandise, and it may have been a financially successful event.

The company printed 20,000 programs and sold them for \$19 each, and they were all sold out well before the show started. Most merchandise sold out an hour before the show, with a lot of history packs and CD's of the entrance music of Nakamura & Hiroshi Tanahashi being among the best selling items.

As for the show itself, reports were it was good. It moved quickly, as it went three-and-a-half hours. In an attempt to save money, the company had decreed they were going to end, no matter what, at 9:30 p.m., in order to avoid paying overtime for the people working the show. They took no intermission and rolled out one match after the other, with no long matches.

The show aired from 1:10 a.m. to 4:35 a.m. that night on TV-Asahi. It was very clear the network is no longer confident in the promotion, both because of the late time slot and also how it advertised the show. It did not advertise it as New Japan's Tokyo Dome show, or even pro wrestling, but "New Year's Fight Special," clearly trying to confuse viewers that it may be something left over from the far more publicized MMA shows.

The show's theme was New Japan wrestlers facing wrestlers from independent promotions, and once again, in many cases, the indies came out on top. The negative was with so many fans getting in free and the card filled with indie guys who weren't known to a lot of the audience, the crowd was quiet for most of the show. There were said to be no particularly memorable matches, but the wrestling was usually decent to good.

1. Ryoji Sai of Zero-One Max pinned Naofumi Yamamoto after a high kick and a back suplex in 8:18. It was described as so-so.

2. Masato Tanaka of Zero-One Max teamed with Kintaro Kanemura & Bad Boy Hido from Apache Pro Wrestling to beat Gedo & Jado & Jushin Liger in 10:03 when Kanemura came off the top rope with a senton to pin Jado. Several other wrestlers from Apache Pro Wrestling hit the ring and threw Gedo & Jado out, and they were doing a number on Liger. The final big move was Kanemura putting Liger on a table on the floor and a plancha off the top rope to the floor onto him. Crowd wasn't much into this match.

3. Tiger Mask & Minoru of New Japan beat Tatsuhito Takaiwa of Zero-One Max & Tomohiro Ishii of Riki Promotions in 12:11 when Minoru pinned Ishii after a high kick. Tiger Mask hit Ishii with a missile dropkick and Minoru used a suplex to set up the finish. After the match, Tiger Mask & Minoru, who are usually rivals within New Japan, shook hands. Minoru then attacked Tiger Mask and gave him a German suplex. Said to be a good match.

Current note: First time we see an appearance from Tomohiro Ishii, at this point a young wrestler who was part of a smaller promotion.

4. New Japan booker Riki Choshu, positioning himself as an outsider from his own Riki Promotions, teamed with Takashi Uwano of his promotion, Daisuke Sekimoto of Big Japan, and Kohei Sato & Yoshito Sasaki & Kamikaze from Zero-One Max, to beat Tatsumi Fujinami & Takashi Iizuka & Osamu Nishimura & Toru Yano & Hirooki Goto & Hiroshi Nagao in 12:16. Match was said to have been bad. There was a big brawl at ringside, and while this was going on, Choshu lariated Nagao and Sato pinned him after a German suplex. By this point, the home team had lost three out of four matches.

5. Akebono made his New Japan debut, teaming with Yutaka Yoshie to beat New Japan heels Black Strong Machine (Junji Hirata) & Hiro Saito in 9:18. Akebono & Yoshie did the gimmick of dancing fat guys, as Yoshie is pushing 400 pounds himself, but can move and work decently at that weight. Highlight was Machine & Saito doing a double-team suplex on Akebono. They tried it a second time, and this time Akebono suplexed both men at the same time in a spot that always gets over in Japan. Saito used a senton on Yoshie. Akebono squashed both Machine & Saito in the corner. Akebono did his 64 finisher (a bad looking sumo move) on Machine and then choke slammed him. Yoshie pinned Saito after a splash off the top rope.

Current note: Akebono, whose career seemingly ended after a health problem that was very serious and largely covered up, was one of the greatest sumos in history. It would be no exaggeration whatsoever to say this would be the equivalent of LeBron James, after his NBA career was over, appearing at WrestleMania.

6. Yuji Nagata pinned Kazunari Murakami from Big Mouth Loud in 13:11. Murakami came out with new manager Kantaro Hoshino, who was a heel manager for years in New Japan, as well as Yoshiaki Fujiwara and Enson Inoue. Murakami did his wild brawling and nearly got an armbar. Nagata came back and got an armbar, but Murakami made the ropes. Murakami juiced and Nagata head-butted him many times to open the cut up worse. Nagata then got the pin after two back suplexes.

7. Shinjiro Otani, the top star of Zero-One Max, pinned departing New Japan veteran Koji Kanemoto in 10:47 after a dragon suplex. Good match. These two formed a great junior heavyweight tag team many years ago. Today, Otani wrestles as a heavyweight and with Kanemoto leaving, people were expecting more of a one-sided match than they ended up getting. It had been talked that this would be Kanemoto's last show with the promotion, although his contract doesn't expire until the end of the month and he did work the 1/8 show at Korakuen Hall.

8. Katsuyori Shibata made it five out of seven wins for the outsiders, which at this point was getting ridiculous, since the top headliner for Big Mouth Loud pinned New Japan's U-30 champion, Hiroshi Tanahashi, in 10:47. Tanahashi went from 2004 where he placed second in the G-1 Climax tournament and wrestling in the main event at the company's biggest show of the year, to losing here after a soccer kick to the head.

9. Giant Bernard pinned Manabu Nakanishi in 9:53. With no intermission, this was the match the fans decided was intermission. They did power stuff but was told the match was terrible. Nakanishi used the torture rack, but Bernard escaped. Bernard did his Baldo bomb (tree slam), but then missed a splash off the top rope. Both guys hit each other with lariats, and then Nakanishi used a German suplex. Bernard came back using a bicycle kick, a lariat and a splash off the top for the win. They were teasing Bernard as a potential challenger for Lesnar, but he didn't get over well. Bernard will be a regular, but on this show he was billed as an outsider, in his debut match after jumping from All Japan. So at this point New Japan lost six of eight matches. There has actually been some talk of building Bernard up for a title shot at Lesnar.

Current note: Giant Bernard is now WWE's head trainer at the Performance Center, Matt Bloom.

10. Masahiro Chono & Hiroyoshi Tenzan retained the IWGP tag team titles over Takao Omori of Zero-One Max & free agent Shiro Koshinaka when Chono pinned Koshinaka after a shining kekka kick in 19:28. Said to be decent. The match came from a good angle on 12/10 when they did a contract signing. Omori threw a trophy at Tenzan after the match. Some fans yelled in a spoof on WWE and Howard Finkel, "This feud must continue."

Antonio Inoki, even though he is no longer owner, showed up to give a speech. His story for the night was he was going to promote a show in Djakarta, Bangladesh next month, at the 100,000-seat Djakarta Stadium. The current plan is for New Japan to run a shows there on 2/24 and 2/25, with the Bangladesh government as the promoters, using New Japan, TNA and CMLL wrestlers with Lesnar as the headliner.

11. Brock Lesnar retained the IWGP heavyweight title pinning Shinsuke Nakamura in 8:48. They were rushed to end the show by 9:30 p.m., although it fits into Lesnar's gimmick that he wins all his matches in less than 10:00. Brad Rheingans came out as Lesnar's manager. Lesnar, who has looked good in his New Japan matches, moving well and being aggressive, came out and started throwing tackles in the corner. Nakamura got out of the corner and kept his distance, throwing leg kicks. After a few low kicks, he delivered an enzuigiri. After another kick, Lesnar caught his leg with his left arm and took his head off with a lariat with his right arm. At another point Nakamura jumped on Lesnar's back and Lesnar did an electric chair like fallback on Nakamura. Nakamura rolled out of the ring. Lesnar came after him and was beating on him, and threw him back in the ring. Nakamura nailed Lesnar with a sliding kick as he tried to get in after him, and then hit a tope. As they fought outside, Lesnar threw Nakamura into the post. He threw Nakamura in the ring and beat on him until missing an elbow drop. Nakamura got a choke, but Lesnar got up and rammed him backwards into the turnbuckles to break it. Lesnar delivered a few spears, until Nakamura caught him with a kick and used a flying triangle, but

Lesnar got a rope break. Nakamura used a missile dropkick and German suplex, followed by a flying armbar and triangle combination, but Lesnar powered out. Lesnar used a hard lariat, and followed with the verdict for the pin. New Japan promotes and showcases Lesnar as something special, like Andre the Giant, Hulk Hogan, Stan Hansen and Bruiser Brody were in wrestling's TV heyday. They want him to be a stiff, believable and total no nonsense powerhouse wrestling champion.

JANUARY 4, 2007

Last year the annual New Japan 1/4 show at the Tokyo Dome was considered a possible end of an era. They went one more year, and now it looks more likely than ever.

The 1/4 era began in 1992, when a New Japan show billed as Starrcade '92 in the Egg Dome drew an announced full house of 60,000 fans (50,000 is probably a more legitimate number) paying \$3.7 million. In the main event that night, Riki Choshu pinned Tatsumi Fujinami to win the IWGP title, while WCW champion Lex Luger retained the title pinning Masahiro Chono. Other main event level matches included Sting & Keiji Muto over Rick & Scott Steiner, Antonio Inoki over Hiroshi Hase and Big Van Vader going to a double disqualification with El Gigante. They sold out the next year with Genichiro Tenryu pinning Choshu, Muto pinning Chono to win the NWA world heavyweight title, The Hell Raisers (Road Warrior Hawk & Kensuke "Power Warrior" Sasaki) doing a double count out with the Steiner Brothers, Sting pinned Hase and in what was a dream jr. heavyweight match at the time, Jushin Liger pinning Ultimo Dragon to win the IWGP jr. title.

In 1994, they came close to a sellout (48,000) with Tenryu pinning Antonio Inoki, Shinya Hashimoto keeping the IWGP title over Chono, Choshu pinning Yoshiaki Fujiwara, Hulk Hogan pinning Fujinami and Steiners over Muto & Hase.

They sold out in 1995 (52,500) with Hashimoto pinning Sasaki to keep the IWGP title, Hase & Muto keeping the IWGP tag titles over Steiners and Inoki pinning Sting in a horrible match.

Another sellout came in 1996 when Nobuhiko Takada pinned Muto in a rematch of their sellout a few months earlier to win the IWGP title as the New Japan vs. UWFI feud was at its peak. The show didn't have the depth most of the other years had but the main event was on fire at the time. 1997 was another sellout with Hashimoto pinning Choshu to keep the IWGP title, Power Warrior over Great Muta, Liger beat Ultimo Dragon again and the 80s tag team of Fujinami & Kengo Kimura won the IWGP tag titles over the 90s team of Chono & Hiroyoshi Tenzan. They also had a rematch of a match nearly two decades earlier in the heyday of the original Inoki martial arts series, as they brought back Willie Williams to lose to Inoki.

In those years, TV-Asahi would have major TV specials, sometimes in prime time, but usually heavily promoted late night specials that would do big numbers.

1998 was another sellout and a \$6 million live gate largely due to it being the retirement show for Choshu. And here we are, nine years later, and Choshu is still a prominent part of the promotion. Sasaki pinned Muto to keep the IWGP title and Don Frye pinned Naoya Ogawa in a grudge match as battle of the former Ultimate Ultimate champ and the former Olympic silver

medalist in judo. 1999 was another sellout with Muto beating Scott Norton to keep the IWGP title, Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan over Tenryu & Shiro Koshinaka to win the IWGP tag titles, and the famous semi shoot with Hashimoto vs. Ogawa that led to the most well remembered feud in the last decade.

But as pro wrestling went down, the sellouts ended. In recent years, New Year's Eve took over from 1/4 as the big night at that time of the year, and interest dwindled. Even as late as 2004, they put 40,000 fans in the building, based largely on tradition, for Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Yoshihiro Takayama, as a double world title match. They had revived the NWF title from the 70s, and Takayama owned it, while Nakamura was the IWGP champion. Nakamura won via submission after being dominated to end the 14-match show. Muto (who by this time had left New Japan for All Japan) & Bob Sapp beat Chono & Tenzan and Yuji Nagata beat Sasaki.

Last year's show drew 31,000 fans, but paid was only around 10,000. There was still a late night special, but it aired from 1:10 a.m. to 4:35 a.m. with almost no promotion. Not only that, but TV-Asahi wouldn't even list the show as pro wrestling, instead trying to confuse viewers into thinking it was a big MMA show by listing it as "New Year's Fight Special." Brock Lesnar beat Nakamura to keep the IWGP title and Chono & Tenzan beat Takao Omori & Shiro Koshinaka to keep the tag team titles. Even though paid attendance wasn't good, there was a light at the end of the tunnel as those who got in free spent a lot of money on merchandise. The merchandise figure was significantly more than \$500,000 (they did \$380,000 in program sales alone, selling out the entire stock—perhaps from people who wanted a collectors' item from the last big show). The show was considered a success, which meant they would try again, even though the paid attendance wouldn't have been able to sellout Sumo Hall.

Six years ago, the idea of All Japan vs. New Japan led to two Tokyo Dome sellouts. This year, the combination of interpromotional matches and the annual tradition meant almost nothing. There were only 18,000 fans (announced as 28,000) and just over 10,000 paid. To call it a disappointment would be to label every major show by New Japan a disappointment.

The four-hour show was built around three matches. The main event was a dream match with New Japan's top early 90s tag team, Keiji Muto & Masahiro Chono, joining forces to face the company's best late-90s team, Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima. Both teams have been done for years, since Muto and Kojima left New Japan for All Japan at the start of 2002, although Tenzan & Kojima did reform their team at All Japan's Real World Tag League tournament at the end of the year, coming out as the winners. The match had a few themes. It ended up being a tribute match to Shinya Hashimoto, who along with Muto & Chono as "The Three Musketeers," were the leaders of the promotion during the Tokyo Dome era. Hashimoto passed away on July 11, 2005 at the age of 40 from a cerebral hemorrhage. In New Japan's first Tokyo Dome sellout, held on February 10, 1990, it was 26-year-old Chono & 23-year-old Hashimoto in the role as the young tag team that faced Antonio Inoki & Seiji Sakaguchi, the veterans, in the final match on the show, with Lou Thesz as referee.

Muto was very much negative to the idea of using the main event as a Hashimoto tribute. But the day of the show, he was convinced to go along. This was very much like a Smackdown show

where they do all the Eddie Guerrero spots and pay tribute to him.

The other two main events were both world title matches. The theme was All Japan's champion would defend against a New Japan wrestler, and vice versa. New Japan star Yuji Nagata challenged champion Minoru Suzuki for the Triple Crown. This was pushed as the final match of a 21-year rivalry, dating back to high school. When both were seniors in 1986, Suzuki beat Nagata twice, once in the Tokyo City high school tournament and another time at Japanese sectionals. Nagata ended up being the better wrestler, winning a national championship in 1992 before turning pro. Suzuki turned pro right out of college, but made his name doing worked shoots and later real shoots in Pancrase.

The other main event was IWGP champion Hiroshi Tanahashi defending against All Japan's Taiyo Kea. They were reported to us as the two best matches on the show. Neither title changed hands.

The general feeling was it was a so-so show. Some of the matches, most notably Nagata vs. Suzuki, would have come across a lot better in the old days when there was more believability. It neither helped nor harmed the company, although it may be the final event for a long time at the Dome. Another major difference from tradition is Antonio Inoki was not even at the show for the first time anyone could remember, nor did he have anything to do with the show. Inoki is trying to raise money to put together a deal to buy back controlling interest in New Japan from the videogame company Yukes.

Both All Japan and New Japan are likely to continue to work together as All Japan has as 2/17 date at Sumo Hall, and New Japan has the building booked the next night. All Japan has already announced Suzuki vs. Kojima for the Triple Crown title on top, plus Shuji Kondo vs. Katsuhiko Nakajima for the jr. title. New Japan will have Tanahashi defend against either Giant Bernard, Chono, Toshiaki Kawada (which explains why Kawada had to beat Shinsuke Nakamura on this show) or Katsuyori Shibata. On 1/8, Simon Inoki said he was trying to put together Tanahashi vs. Shibata as the main event on the show. Shibata beat Tanahashi on the January 4, 2006, Dome show, and then before Shibata was to even out the score, relations between New Japan and Fumihiko Uwai (who ran Shibata's company) fell apart.

1. Masa Fuchi (All Japan) & El Samurai & Ryusuke Taguchi beat Kikutaro (All Japan) & Nobutaka Araya (All Japan) & Akira Raijin (All Japan) in 8:20 when Fuchi pinned Kikutaro. Said to be a decent match, more about Kikutaro doing a one-man comedy show as the match highlight.
2. Gedo & Jado defeated Nosawa (All Japan) & Mazada (All Japan) in 13:06 when Gedo pinned Nosawa after a splash off the top rope. Was told this match was a disappointment.
3. Togi Makabe & Toru Yano & Tomohiro Ishii beat D-Lo Brown (All Japan) & Bull Buchanan (All Japan) & Travis Tomko in 9:36 when Makabe pinned Buchanan after a lariat. Not much of a match.
4. Taru (All Japan) & Suwama (All Japan) & Ro-Z (All Japan) & Giant Bernard beat Riki Choshu & Manabu Nakanishi & Takashi Iizuka & Naofumi Yamamoto in 19:36. Long match

ending when Suwama pinned Iizuka after a Jumbo Tsuruta-style Greco-Roman backdrop. Said to be so-so.

5. Tiger Mask & Koji Kanemoto & Wataru Inoue & Kaz Hayashi (All Japan) & Taka Michinoku (All Japan) beat Jushin Liger & Milano Collection A.T. & Minoru & Shuji Kondo (All Japan) & Yasshi in 13:01. A fast-paced entertaining match that ended when Tiger mask pinned Yasshi after a Tiger suplex.

During intermission, Katsuhiko Nagata came out. They noted his 12/31 win over Shuichiro Katsumura on the K-1 show. Then, on the big screen, they played a match with Tetsuya Naito beating Mitsuhide Hirasawa on 10/29 in Kobe. Naito won the match and got the TV-Asahi trophy for company's best rookie of the year.

6. Toshiaki Kawada (Free agent) pinned Shinsuke Nakamura in 19:02 with a kick to the face. Very stiff match with lots of hard kicks. Heard they had a good match.

7. Minoru Suzuki (Free agent/All Japan) retained the Triple Crown over Yuji Nagata in 17:22. Strong match with both men bleeding. The finish saw Nagata hit a knee to the face and g for his bridging back suplex finisher. Suzuki reversed it in mid-air and got behind Nagata for a choke. He did the choke suplex, but Nagata landed on his feet, and grabbed an armbar. Suzuki reversed it and got the choke back on and the referee stopped the match.

8. Hiroshi Tanahashi pinned Taiyo Kea (All Japan) in 17:09 to retain the IWGP heavyweight title. Kea was throwing elbows and did his TKO finisher, but Tanahashi kicked out. Kea did a Tiger driver, but Tanahashi kicked out. Tanahashi came back with a German suplex, followed by a dragon suplex. He went to the top rope and came off with a flying body press for the win.

9. Keiji Muto (All Japan) & Masahiro Chono beat Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima (All Japan) in 18:43. The fans took to Muto & Chono as the two biggest stars on the show. Both Muto & Chono used Hashimoto's jumping DDT and used the Rikidozan style chops he'd use in his comeback. Muto & Chono did a double-team shining wizard on Tenzan. Then Muto put the figure four on Kojima and Chono put the STF on Tenzan. Chono and Tenzan were the legal men and Tenzan submitted for the finish. Muto used a long white towel like Hashimoto did, then both put on white headbands like Hashimoto. They both looked to the sky and a tape of Hashimoto played on the big screen and they left the ring to Hashimoto's theme.

JANUARY 4, 2008

New Japan's 17-year-old tradition of opening the year with the 1/4 Tokyo Dome remains hovering on extinction.

But this past week's installment based on most reports was a good show, highlighted by New Japan wrestlers battling outsiders from TNA, All Japan, Zero-One Max and the new Dradition (formerly Muga) promotion.

Shinsuke Nakamura captured the "real" IWGP heavyweight title in the main event for the second time in his career, beating natural rival Hiroshi Tanahashi in the main event.

The other main event saw Kurt Angle retain the IGF version of the same title, beating Yuji Nagata in what was said to be the best match on the show. This was designed to set up a title unification match on 2/17 at Tokyo Sumo Hall. This was set up with Angle and Jeff Jarrett coming to the ring to set up a confrontation after Nakamura was awarded the belt. We don't know if there is anything to this, because it's Antonio Inoki, but Inoki claimed Angle vs. Naoya Ogawa would headline his 2/16 show at the Ariake Coliseum.

Jarrett hit Toru Yano over the head with a guitar during a melee during Giant Bernard & Travis Tomko's retaining of the IWGP tag team titles against the Steiner Brothers. Jarrett was brought to ringside late in the show and announced as TNA's witness, first for the tag title match. Jarrett was there to strengthen the business relationship between New Japan and TNA. After the show, he told reporters the two wrestlers he was most interested in bringing to TNA were Nakamura and Tiger Mask. Both will be coming to the 1/22 Impact tapings, although we don't have it confirmed they will wrestle. Nakamura would be there for magazine photos to build his unification match.

The show drew 20,000 fans, split roughly half paid and half papered. The announced attendance was a sellout of 27,000. They set the Dome up for about 20,000-seat configuration so it was packed. You could get scalper tickets in front of the Dome but the actual box office wasn't selling tickets the day of the show.

Kind of weird to have a super papered event, yet the walk-up on a nice holiday afternoon on a show that has a tradition of doing big walk-up business in the past they didn't have tickets available for. At this point in time, nobody could reasonably expect much more than 10,000 paid for New Japan, so by modern standards getting the place packed and having a good show up-and-down is considered a success.

From the Japanese side, they were happy with how things went with TNA. For all the nonsense regarding TNA's U.S. television, for Japan, they have Angle, Team 3-D and the Steiners who are all name foreigners to the Japanese. Granted, nobody is coming in who is going to add a ton of extra ticket sales, but they can do a New Japan vs. TNA program in Japan and do quality match-ups. In addition, people like A.J. Styles and Petey Williams impressed the fans who were there and New Japan management, and their take was that TNA has plenty of good workers.

Some of the matches involving TNA talent will air as part of a one-hour special on the show that airs 1/17 on Spike TV. A 75-minute version of the show aired on 1/5 past midnight in a special on Japan's TV-Asahi.

1. Christian Cage & Petey Williams & A.J. Styles beat Milano Collection A.T. & Minoru & Prince Devitt in 10:35 when Styles pinned Minoru after the Styles clash right after Williams gave Minoru the Canadian Destroyer. It was funny with WWE being a big deal in Japan not all that long ago, because Christian got no real reaction. Finish said to have come off well, particularly the Canadian Destroyer. A.T. blew out his knee and needed to get it scoped, and will be out two to three months.

Current note: Except for one WWE match, a last minute change made because of several

health issues, this was the only time A.J. Styles ever wrestled Finn Balor.

2. Wataru Inoue retained the IWGP jr. title beating Christopher Daniels in 10:17 after two versions of the Michinoku Drover. Daniels worked as a heel and was booed, but aggressively attacked Inoue with punches, two moonsaults and a cobra twist. The two also exchanges punches and chops.

3. Manabu Nakanishi pinned Abyss in 6:00. They brawled outside the ring with Abyss ramming Nakanishi gave Abyss a face crusher on the weapon he brought to ringside. Nakanishi took over with a spear, and two German suplexes to get the pin. The battle of the New Japan powerhouse vs. TNA powerhouse got over pretty good.

4. The outsider group of Masato Tanaka & Tatsuhiro Takaiwa of Zero-One Max teaming with Dradition's Yutaka Yoshie and Katsushi Takemura beat Takashi Iizuka & Koji Kanemoto & Ryusuke Taguchi & Tiger Mask. Finish saw Yoshie pin Taguchi after a splash in 8:36.

5. Team 3-D beat Togi Makabe & Toru Yano in 13:12. This was a battle of TNA's best-known tag team against the winners of the *Tokyo Sports* tag team of the year award. It makes sense for 3-D to come back off this win and challenge Giant Bernard & Travis Tomko for the tag team titles. Tomoaki Honma was at ringside and hit both members of 3-D with the kendo stick. Yano also hit Devon with the bell hammer. Ray used a ladder and hit both Makabe and Yano. They did the Wazzup spot on Yano. The finish saw Devon power bomb Yano through a table, and then both used a 3-D on Makabe for the pin.

6. Tatsumi Fujinami of the Dradition promotion teamed with New Japan's Legend group of Riki Choshu & Masahiro Chono & Jushin Liger & AKIRA to beat Gedo & Jado of New Japan & The Voodoo Murderers—Brother Yasshi & Shuji Kondo & Taru, of All Japan. The idea of seeing Fujinami & Choshu, the legendary rivals in the 80s, team up again, apparently got a lot of older fans interested in the show at the end. Choshu pinned Yasshi in 17:18 after a lariat. Choshu & Fujinami shook hands at the end, but they did to a tease during the match when Choshu accidentally gave Fujinami a lariat. Fujinami proposed an idea to get his company some interest where they would do a feud with New Japan's legends by trying to resurrect Fujinami vs. Choshu, which from a historical timing situation would be like doing Freebirds vs. Von Erichs in 2008.

7. Great Muta pinned Hirooki Goto in 13:54. Goto came out in a Samurai costume with a long stick. Goto attacked Muta as he came to the ring, but Muta blew green mist in his face and then attacked Goto with his own stick. Goto juiced. Most of the match as Muta working on his knees with the dragon screw and figure four leglock. Muta won with two shining wizards and a moonsault. This match was a disappointment because Goto just came off an IWGP title match which finished high in match of the year balloting, but Muta treated this like it was his show. While Muta returning to New Japan got one of the biggest reactions on the show, and he's far better known than Goto, the fact he was going over should have meant he gave a lot of the match to Goto.

8. Giant Bernard & Travis Tomko beat Rick & Scott Steiner to retain the IWGP tag team

champions in 12:50. In the 90s, the Steiners were fixtures on the Tokyo Dome shows during the peak of New Japan's Tokyo Dome era, with matches against Hiroshi Hase & Kensuke Sasaki, Sting & Keiji Muto, The Hell Raisers (Hawk & Sasaki), Muto & Hase (twice) and the Road Warriors. So their returning was like bringing Fujinami & Choshu back. Before the match, Jeff Jarrett came out and did an interview talking about the New Japan and TNA relationship, as TNA is trying to strengthen the working agreement for 2008. He then sat at ringside with New Japan president Naoki Sugabayashi. It went back-and-forth early until they got heat on Rick. Big pop when Scott gave Tomko a Frankensteiner. They used the Road Warriors double impact on Tomko, but ref Massao "Tiger" Hattori was knocked down. Jarrett then picked up his guitar and took off his jacket. Jarrett went to hit Bernard with a guitar shot, but Yano & Makabe came out and stopped him. Jarrett hit Yano with a guitar shot, and while all this was going on, Bernard & Tomko did their Magic killer (the same move La Resistance when they were Conway & Grenier used to use in WWE) on Rick for the pin. The Steiners were such a big deal in the early 90s that as bad as this sounds on paper, the crowd enjoyed it.

Current note: Although the magic killer is best known for Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows in New Japan, it was actually used first by the Bernard & Tomko team.

9. Kurt Angle retained his version of the IWGP heavyweight title beating Yuji Nagata in 18:29. From all accounts, this was the show-stealing match for the first time these two have ever wrestled each other. They did a lot of mat wrestling since Nagata was a two-time college champion in Japan. Angle used the figure four, stemming from the IGF show where he was managed by The Destroyer. Nagata came back with the Nagata lock. Angle did a moonsault. Nagata used a superplex but Angle kicked out. Nagata did all of his moves but Angle eventually came back to win with the ankle lock.

10. Shinsuke Nakamura captured the "real" version of the IWGP heavyweight title from Hiroshi Tanahashi in 23:08 with a landslide off the top rope, and a second in the ring. The landslide is Nakamura's move, similar to a Michinoku Driver. Most of the match saw Tanahashi work on Nakamura's injured shoulder from the summer. They had a good match, but they had put a lot of pressure on themselves to have a classic since they are supposed to be the ones to carry New Japan for the future and have been groomed for years to have the legendary top spot rivalry. It's always fallen just short of what it needs to be. After the match, Angle, Nakamura and Jarrett were in the ring to set up the IWGP title unification match.

JANUARY 4, 2009

There were moments at the 20th anniversary of pro wrestling at the Tokyo Dome that led people to believe the beleaguered business is about to make a comeback.

On the surface, some of the reasons sound funny. Sure, there were about 27,500 fans at the annual 1/4 show, and unlike every show in recent years, free tickets were harder to come by.

It was the largest paid attendance for a New Japan show since 2004, when they used Bob Sapp when he was all the rage.

Pro Wrestling NOAH vs. Shinsuke Nakamura & Hirooki Goto was expected to bring a large NOAH contingent to the show.

For long-time fans, there was intrigue in Jun Akiyama vs. Manabu Nakanishi, since the two had long histories together before pro wrestling. Years earlier, they were the two big stars on the Senshu College wrestling team. They were roommates during that period, and later being the two finalists for a spot on the 1992 Olympic team in freestyle wrestling. Nakanishi won that match, and then both turned pro after the Olympics, and Akiyama was an immediate big star while Nakanishi never quite lived up to expectations.

And Keiji Muto vs. Hiroshi Tanahashi had been built up for months as the ultimate showdown as New Japan tried to get its IWGP heavyweight title back from the Wrestler of the Year, who held the Triple Crown and IWGP titles at the same time.

But what was even more encouraging was the amount of fans in their 20s at the show.

“I felt good energy at the Tokyo Dome,” noted one person affiliated with the industry there. “People were really enjoying the show. We may finally have a whole new generation of wrestling fans. The willing suspension of disbelief was there.”

Another noted funny reasoning, between all the fans wearing Mistico masks, and even more, the lack of reaction when the theme songs for Riki Choshu and Misawa played.

“Power Hall,” the distinctive Choshu theme may be the longest lasting unchangeable entrance song in wrestling history, as Choshu has used the music for about 30 years. Even among casual people, the music is symbolic. When the music played, there was little reaction, which could be construed as a newer audience that doesn’t care about Choshu, whose popularity peak was decades ago and he’s now 57-years-old.

But then when Choshu himself came out and his face was on the screen, the place went wild. A similar thing happened with Misawa. Clearly, it was an audience that for the most part had never been to a live show, and obviously didn’t grow up watching it on television.

It was an audience that came because pro wrestling is starting to become cool. That sounds negative, because Japan is a fad culture to begin with, and attracting a fad audience is probably not going to have legs.

But there was an upside. Enthusiastic reactions to every match on the show. And the feeling that these fans, similar to most of the WWE live audience today, are newer fans who don’t have the glory days to compare it to.

Japanese pro wrestling had fallen victim to not just the rise in MMA interest, but also being unable to compete with what it was. With the exception of NOAH shows at Budokan Hall, the older audience that had been around for the hugely successful 90s, realized almost every aspect of the product had dropped off.

The matches weren’t as good. The stars weren’t as charismatic. The atmosphere couldn’t compare. The days of walking down the street and seeing something related to wrestling

somewhere, whether people wearing a T-shirt, or an advertisement with a wrestler, or someone leafing through a wrestling magazine, were long over.

It's no different than the U.S., where WWE was having trouble competing with the quality and excitement of 1997-2001 until they got a new audience that never even watched during those years and had no frame of reference to recognize the product had fallen.

The show featured four title changes, as Tanahashi beat Muto in a long match that ended the show to take back the IWGP title. TNA wrestlers captured two belts, as Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley beat Yujiro & Tetsuya Naito to win the IWGP jr. tag titles, and Team 3-D beat Togi Makabe & Toru Yano to win the heavyweight tag titles. The other title change saw Tiger Mask win the IWGP jr. title from Low Ki, with the plan of building a big match with Tiger Mask vs. Mistico down the line.

It is expected that the two title wins by TNA talent along with an eight-man tag match where Kurt Angle & Kevin Nash & Choshu & Masahiro Chono (Choshu & Chono were announced as the newest members of the Main Event Mafia, as Chono was trying to recreate the NWO Japan gimmick from the 90s, although Choshu made it obvious to those who knew him that he wasn't into the idea) beat Giant Bernard & Takashi Iizuka & Tomohiro Ishii & Karl Anderson will air on a one-hour Spike TV special. The date of airing is still uncertain.

There were also plenty of business talks in the days leading to the show. The putting over of TNA talent means a stronger relationship between the two companies.

They aired a tape on the big screen of Dixie Carter, Jeff Jarrett and Mick Foley congratulating New Japan on the 20th anniversary of their debut at the Tokyo Dome. The crowd gave them a good reaction.

Jeremy Borash was flown in as guest ring announcer for the second straight year, and it looks like the idea that the American TV ring announcer comes making it seem like a bigger event will go forward.

Borash didn't get in the ring to do the introductions for the TNA matches (he also introduced the Tanaka vs. Nagata match but nobody seemed to make sense out of that one, perhaps the idea that since it was for the Zero-One title, an outsider belt, they'd use the outsider ring announcer).

Muto met with New Japan people and they came to an agreement that All Japan and New Japan would work together this year, as well as coordinate their schedules so they didn't run shows in the same market on top of each other.

Choshu, while no longer the booker, is a major power influence inside the office working with company President Naoki Sugabayashi. In addition, Misawa, who has always had the mentality that you only minimally mix talent to keep it special, recognized that with losing network television in March, to keep business strong, they have to give fans bigger dream matches.

There was talk of a strong New Japan vs. Pro Wrestling NOAH feud back-and-forth, hoping it'll keep the momentum going and be able to keep NOAH strong by presenting unique matchups.

on the big shows.

Already announced for the next big show on 2/15 at Sumo Hall is Tanahashi vs. Nakamura for the IWGP heavyweight title, Angle vs. Bernard and Místico vs. Mephisto. Team 3-D is scheduled to defend the titles and Beer Money is scheduled to debut.

There were also some interesting characters backstage, including Awesome Kong from TNA, Bob Sapp, who came to see Nash (they worked together on “The Longest Yard”) and talked about wanting to work for this group now that he’s done with Hustle, as well as Seiji Sakaguchi and son Yukio. Seiji was telling everyone that his son wasn’t going to fight anymore, while Yukio was saying that he wanted to.

The 11-match show went four hours, yet most of the matches seemed rushed. The show was said to be overall a major success, even though there were no matches of the years. The TV-Asahi show the next night focused on Misawa & Sugiura vs. Nakamura & Goto and Muto vs. Tanahashi, which were considered the two best matches by most live, along with the Yuji Nagata vs. Masato Tanaka Zero-One title rematch.

The first of what have now been 38 New Japan shows at the Tokyo Dome, was on April 24, 1989, which set what was at the time the all-time pro wrestling gate record at \$2,781,000, with nearly 44,000 fans in attendance. The show featured the debut of the Jushin Liger gimmick, with the attempt to turn Keiichi Yamada into the next generation Tiger Mask, by beating Kuniaki Kobayashi, who was one of Tiger Mask’s most famous opponents. Lou Thesz was brought in to referee an IWGP tag team title match. Martial arts legend Benny “The Jet” Urquidez (who sported a 56-1-1 career record as a kickboxer with multiple world titles, and had during his career fought frequently in Japan, but had retired as a kickboxer five years earlier and by this point had become a well-known actor), did his only pro wrestling match on the show. The show also featured an eight-man tournament for the vacant IWGP title, won by Big Van Vader over Shinya Hashimoto (at the time Hashimoto was 23 and this was the show that really made his name as a somewhat unknown going all the way to the finals including pinning Choshu), as well as the using five Russian world class amateur wrestlers and a judo gold medalist. This story generated worldwide media publicity at the time, because the Soviet government had never allowed its sports stars to compete professionally, but when the economy went bust, they sold their star athletes and the first sports company to make a deal was New Japan, even before the NHL. Several debuted at Sumo Hall two months earlier in what were billed as exhibitions, but this was supposed to be their first “real” matches against top pro wrestling competition. It was actually the idea of Russian real sports stars out of the Olympics and world championships coming to New Japan that drew the house, with the main event being a gimmick no rope match with Antonio Inoki against 1972 Olympic judo gold medalist Shota Chochoshvili, billed as for the World Martial Arts championship, with the no rope signifying they were doing it on a judo platform. Chochoshvili used several uranages (this was actually the match that introduced that move to pro wrestling) for a fifth round knockout as Inoki did the job for the first time in a martial arts match after coming up with the gimmick 14 years earlier. As he got back to the dressing room, Thesz came up to him and said, “Antonio, I’m proud of

you. Tonight you became a businessman.” Having Chochoshvili and Salman Hashimikov (a former world champion amateur, who beat Bam Bam Bigelow, and set a record by winning the IWGP heavyweight title one month after his pro debut when he pinned Vader) go over strong in the last two matches led to huge business as New Japan was able to jack up ticket prices and sold out everywhere with a three-way Japan vs. U.S. (using shooters like Steve Williams, Brad Rheingans, Manny Fernandez, Bam Bam Bigelow and Buzz Sawyer among others on Team USA) vs. Russia program. The show opened with a nearly six minute video package, half devoted to famous clips of past shows at the Tokyo Dome, and the other half previewing this show.

1. Milano Collection A.T. & Minoru & Taichi Ishikari beat Mitsuhide Hirasawa & Kazuchika Okada & Nobuo Yoshihashi when Milano pinned Yoshihashi in 6:24 of a completely rushed match.
2. Mistico & Ryusuke Taguchi & Prince Devitt beat Gedo & Jado & Averno in 9:50. The story of this match was the attempt to build Mistico into a Mil Mascaras. There was a group of fans hot to see him, but a lot of people didn't know him. The match was put together for him to shine, with Averno there to make him look good. It was a success because he won over the crowd big by the end with his flying moves. Mistico, Taguchi & Devitt did big dives at the end with Mistico using La Mistica for the submission.
3. In what was billed as the 20th anniversary of Jushin Liger, Liger & one of his first major rivals, Takuma Sano, now of Pro Wrestling NOAH, teamed to beat Koji Kanemoto & Wataru Inoue in 8:47 when Liger pinned Kanemoto after a brainbuster. This was a showcase for Liger, who got a huge reaction in a solid but unspectacular match. Liger talked about wanting to wrestle in NOAH to revive his feud with Sano.
4. Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley as The Motor City Machine Guns, won the IWGP jr. tag titles from No Limit, Yujiro & Tetsuya Naito in 13:21. Strong match with both teams looking good. Naito missed a moonsault and Sabin & Shelley did a double-team move called Made In Detroit for the pin on Naito.
5. Tiger Mask regained the IWGP jr. title beating Low Ki in 8:48. Low Ki came out fast using the Ki Krusher for a near fall, and then did it again outside the ring. Tiger Mask came back in another rushed match, escaping a Ki Krusher and using a choke suplex and two Tiger suplexes for the pin. After the match, Mistico did a backstage interview saying he wanted a shot at the championship, and Tigre Mask agreed to it.
6. Kurt Angle & Kevin Nash & Masahiro Chono & Riki Choshu as the Legends Team beat Giant Bernard & Takashi Iizuka & Tomohiro Ishii & Karl Anderson in 7:09. It started with Nash vs. Bernard doing big man spots. Angle got the hot tag at the end and was German suplexing everyone, and finished Anderson with the ankle lock. After the match, Bernard laid out Angle with a tree bomb to build up their singles match. Angle sold it like he had a neck injury. This match will air and be pushed like it was the main event of the show on the Spike special.
7. Yuji Nagata retained the Zero-One world heavyweight title pinning Masato Tanaka in 11:41.

Great action and heat. Tanaka cracked Nagata with a char shot and he bled. Nagata kicked out of the roaring elbow twice and finished with two back suplexes and a pin.

8. Jun Akiyama pinned Manabu Nakanishi in 10:27. Good match. Politically, since Akiyama will be challenging Kensuke Sasaki on 3/1 for the GHC title, he had go to over, but the expectation is down the line the favor will be returned. Outside the ring, Nakanishi clotheslined Akiyama's knee and even did a plancha and a missile dropkick. Akiyama got a near submission with a guillotine twice but both times Nakanishi powered out but flipping Akiyama over. Akiyama used an exploder off the top rope but Nakanishi kicked out. Nakanishi went for the torture rack, but Akiyama escaped using a DDT, followed by a jumping knee and three exploders for the pin. Again, it felt rushed, with comments that if this was on a NOAH Budokan show, they'd have been able to do more as it would have been a main event or second from the top and given 20 minutes.

9. Team 3-D beat Togi Makabe & Toru Yano, the MVPs (Most Violent Players) to win the IWGP heavyweight tag titles in 6:30. Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan were pulled from the match since Tenzan underwent emergency surgery for a detached retina the day before the show. This was hardcore rules. Probably the weakest match on the show, but it was still better than the match these teams had last year. There were "We Want Tables" chants. Makabe & Yano used kendo stick and garbage can shots early. Makabe used his chain. Team 3-D got a table. Makabe went to hit use his lariat with his arm wrapped up with a chain on Devon. Devon moved, and Makabe hit Yano. The match ended with a 3-D on Makabe for the pin.

10. Shinsuke Nakamura & Hirooki Goto beat Mitsuharu Misawa & Takashi Sugiura in 15:17 of what was the match that probably drew the most fans with the Nakamura-Misawa dream match focus. Misawa, in his first match on a New Japan show in almost four years, was the most over guy on the show. But the New Japan fans were really into Nakamura against a legend. Big pop early as Goto gave Sugiura a front suplex and ran to the corner and gave Misawa a spin kick, knocking him off the apron. Goto laid out Sugiura with a plancha and then tagged Nakamura in to face Misawa for the first time. They traded elbows in mid-ring with Nakamura going down. Misawa then worked in and out of a facelock submission for several minutes before Nakamura finally escaped. Even though he was there to do the job, Sugiura actually was the most impressive. Later, Goto used an elbow off the top on Misawa, as well as a back suplex and German suplex. Misawa came back with an elbow, putting Goto down. Sugiura tagged in with brainbuster on Goto, then a spear and two back flips. Misawa did a splash off the top on Nakamura and then Sugiura put Nakamura in the ankle lock while Misawa held Goto from stopping. Nakamura made the ropes. Sugiura looked good with a German suplex and a dragon suplex on Nakamura for near falls. Goto laid out Sugiura with a shoten while Misawa then used the emerald frosien on Goto. Nakamura then used a last ride power bomb on Misawa. Nakamura and Sugiura were in the ring trading elbows until Sugiura knocked down Nakamura with a punch, and then got a near fall with the Olympic slam. Sugiura used a German suplex for a near fall and went for a lariat, but Nakamura side stepped him and took him down with a flying armbar and the ref stopped it. By winning what was really the highest profile match on the show, it built Nakamura as the IWGP title challenger on the 2/15 show. Misawa then

challenged them for a rematch. This was the best match on the 90 minute television show that aired that night.

11. Hiroshi Tanahashi pinned Keiji Muto in 30:22 to win the IWGP heavyweight title. Tanahashi also became the 50th man to hold the title in its history dating back to Hulk Hogan become first champion in 1983. Very good match. Typical Muto long match where he uses several different varieties of dragon screws, including a few new ones, and mostly works the leg. His timing of when and even at his age, he's got that sudden quickness in movement for a big guy gets everything he does over. Muto went to the figure four three times. It's amazing how Muto, once his knees were shot, was able to do the few moves popularized in the first Takada match in 1995, adding the shining wizard which he got over a few years later, and 13 years later it allows him to do long matches that the Japanese fans afterwards think are classics. Tanahashi came back with dragon screws of his own. Tanahashi did all his usual moves like the dragon suplex, German suplex, sling blade (flying clothesline) and high fly flow (frog splash). Finish saw Muto miss the moonsault and Tanahashi did two high fly flows off different corners for the pin.

JANUARY 4, 2010

The traditional biggest Japanese pro wrestling event of the year, the 19th annual New Japan show at the Tokyo Dome, was regarded as a good show, an event largely built around a series of interpromotional matches between New Japan and Pro Wrestling NOAH.

While they announced 41,500, the actual crowd was said to be about 20,000, down from last year's 27,500, but enough that it was a success.

What made a big difference in the end is that Team NOAH consisted of GHC heavyweight champion Takashi Sugiura, Go Shiozaki, Naomichi Marufuji and Mohammed Yone, appeared.

NOAH's most well known stars who would have meant the most on this stage, Kenta Kobashi, Jun Akiyama and Akira Taue, were not on the show.

Last year's show had both Keiji Muto and Mitsuharu Misawa as outsiders in the main events. Kobashi is out of action and in need of elbow surgery and Akiyama has his own issues to where they didn't want him to wrestle a singles match on a show where you have to deliver. Taue was considered too old to do the kind of match needed. Takeshi Morishima was also not on the show. It was noted that those that were there were enthusiastic for most of the show, and the fan base was mostly newer fans, which was seen as a good sign, and paid was closer to 15,000. The wrestlers were told the real number was 30,000, but the wrestlers who had worked there in the past being told that number immediately dismissed it as being greatly inflated .

Shiozaki and Marufuji both had great matches, with the reports we got that they had the two best matches on the show. Marufuji won New Japan's IWGP jr. title from Tiger Mask. Shiozaki lost to Hiroshi Tanahashi in what came across to many as the real main event on the show, since it was the guy NOAH is grooming to be its top star against the guy most feel is New Japan's real top star. In the politics of putting this series together, it came out as two wins apiece. Marufuji was promised the New Japan title as part of the storyline that started with him winning the Super J Cup. NOAH also chose to protect its champion, Sugiura, which meant Yone

and Shiozaki had to lose.

The negative is that even though Sugiura vs. Hirooki Goto was a good physical match-up, which those at ringside said was quite good, it didn't project well in the Dome. The New Japan fans, and the casual fans, didn't view Sugiura as a world champion caliber guy, since he's been a mid-carder for so many years and his title win over Shiozaki shocked most. So the match had little reaction.

People also haven't accepted Shinsuke Nakamura, the current IWGP heavyweight champion, as a real world champion for New Japan. In the main event, Yoshihiro Takayama, one of the legends of Japanese wrestling, was brought in with the idea of giving Nakamura credibility by putting him over clean in the main event.

But overall the show was considered a strong success as the crowd enjoyed the show, with it being noted the atmosphere was like a Japanese version of WrestleMania, although without the packed Dome.

One of the real highlights of the show was the return to New Japan of Abdullah the Butcher (who, depending upon what birthday you choose to believe, is either 68 or 73) after 24 years, facing Terry Funk (who is 65) as part of an eight-man tag. The crowd went nuts for both men's entrance music and when Funk put on the spinning toe hold. The newer fans who weren't even born in the late 70s when the Funk vs. Butcher feud was at his peak, treated both men as legends for the night.

This was a stark difference to TNA, as TNA on the same night revolved everything around the aging legends. New Japan brought them in, featured them, protected them in the ring by putting them in an eight-man, and everyone felt good. But it was clear it was Tanahashi and Nakamura that were New Japan's biggest stars on its biggest show.

There is also a trivia aspect, since Butcher debuted in 1958, which means this match had him wrestling in his seventh decade. Mae Young, who started in 1939, did eight decades. Lou Thesz did seven decades (starting in the mid-30s, final match in 1990). I'm thinking Gypsy Joe may have debuted in the 50s and he still works on indies fairly often. But not too many have done that. Dory Funk started in 1963 and I don't know about him wrestling in 2020.

Besides Marufuji beating Tiger Mask, the only other title change is that New Japan after one year seems to have finally gotten heavyweight tag team champions. Yujiro & Tetsuya Naito, fresh from a main event run in CMLL and losing their hair, won a three-way over Giant Bernard & Karl Anderson (with Anderson there as the guy to do a job) and champions Team 3-D, to take the title. The win allowed 3-D to remain without having done a job in Japan for something like ten years (long enough that when they claim they never have, nobody remembers different, since the only one was on a relatively small FMW show). If this leads to a straight tag on an upcoming big show with Yujiro & Naito going over, then it's good booking. If it doesn't lead to that, then it's pretty cheesy to change a title in Japan that way.

1. Super Strong Machine & Wataru Inoue & Mitsuhide Hirasawa beat Jushin Liger & Koji

Just a quick get them into the ring and out rushed through match. Interesting to see where Liger stands only because NOAH does so much of a better job in protecting the legacies of the legends of the past.

Current note: This is the first 1/4 show that Okada appeared on. Hirasawa is the departed and not missed Bone Soldier.

2. Ryusuke Taguchi & Prince Devitt retained the IWGP jr. tag titles beating Ultimo Guerrero & Averno in 9:07. Guerrero & Averno are considered the two best working main event heels in the CMLL stable, and Taguchi & Devitt are one of the best tag teams in the business. But heard Guerrero & Averno didn't do well here. Taguchi pinned Averno after the double-team Black Hall vacation. It looks like they are going back to Taguchi & Devitt vs. Gedo & Jado as the next title program.

3. Yujiro & Tetsuya Naito won a three-way hardcore match to capture the IWGP heavyweight tag team titles from Team 3-D, also with Giant Bernard & Karl Anderson, in 13:28. Yujiro pinned Anderson with the Limitless explosion, which looks something like a diamond cutter, in a double team. This was a garbage style match, with ladders and chairs. 3-D power bombed both Anderson and Naito through tables. Bernard came off the top rope with a plancha, putting Yujiro through a table on the floor. I was told the match worked as something different early in the show. The idea was to push Yujiro & Naito as a new fresh top tag team that can headline, a modern version of Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan.

4. Tajiri & Masato Tanaka beat Yuji Nagata & Akebono in 9:37. The finish saw Tajiri blow the mist in Akebono's face, and then blew it in Nagata's face. Tanaka then delivered a running elbow to Nagata, and Tajiri followed with a buzzsaw kick for the pin. The finish surprised a lot of people. Obviously they are building up a Tajiri vs. Nagata feud.

5. Terry Funk & Riki Choshu & Masahiro Chono & Manabu Nakanishi as the Legend Team beat Abdullah the Butcher with the heel group of Toru Yano & Takashi Iizuka & Tomohiro Ishii in 8:52. Funk and Butcher were made the focal point and the stars of this match since it had been so many years since they had been here and their returning was a major deal on the show. While you never say it's the last one, there was the feeling it could be Funk's last appearance in Japan and certainly his last match on a major stage. Butcher is working dates for Osaka Pro Wrestling in a few weeks, but there was also the feeling it was at least his last match with Funk. They were kept apart, as Funk worked early with Yano and Abdullah did his karate chop to the throat of Nakanishi. Big pop when Funk used the spinning toe hold on Iizuka, and Butcher saved. Funk started punching Butcher. Iizuka then went to use his Five Fingers from hell (his oversized metal fingers foreign object) on Funk, but Funk moved and he hit Butcher. Funk started punching Iizuka and Ishii, grabbed the Five Fingers from hell, and handed them to Butcher, which I guess constitutes their closer of a 35 year feud. Abdullah put the Five Fingers from hell on and hit Iizuka and Yano in the throat, and used an elbow drop on Yano. Nakanishi tagged in and put Iizuka up in the torture rack for the submission. Butcher then did a promo. Basic feel good nostalgia.

Current note: You didn't know that Terry Funk once wrestled Tomohiro Ishii. That match would have been unreal if a time machine could take Ishii back to Funk's prime years.

6. In the first New Japan vs. NOAH match, Togi Makabe pinned Mohammed Yone to give New Japan the first win, in 5:39. Yone attacked Makabe as he came to the ring, punching him with his own chains. Makabe came back using a lariat as well as a German suplex off the top rope, finishing with a King Kong kneedrop.

7. Naomichi Marufuji won the IWGP jr. title from Tiger Mask in 14:14. Said to be an excellent match with both men pulling out all the stops. Marufuji won with a shiranui off the top rope, a super kick and finally with the Tiger frosien (a combination of Mitsuharu Misawa's two finishers, the Tiger driver and the emerald frosien) for the pin. Marufuji in a post-match interview talked about the symbolism of everything, noted that Misawa was Tiger Mask early in his career, and that he felt Misawa was in the upper deck watching the match so they had to make it something special.

8. Hiroshi Tanahashi pinned Go Shiozaki in 19:04 with two springboard frog splashes. Very good match. This had the most heat of the New Japan vs. NOAH matches, with fans of both promotions cheering for their guy, plus there were a decent amount of women, and they were also mixed in the reaction.

Current note: The first notable example of Tanahashi bringing the women's audience to New Japan shows.

9. Takashi Sugiura retained the GHC heavyweight title beating Hirooki Goto in 20:54. Coming off a great athletic match, these two did the super stiff style match, with hard blows going back-and-forth. The match had great believability, but it didn't play as well in the huge Dome because the stiffness loses something in a building that large. Sugiura did the usual Kurt Angle style moves, the German suplex, Olympic slam, and ankle lock, as well as a Goldberg style hard spear. Goto kicked out at one from the Olympic slam which got a big pop. Sugiura finally got the ankle lock on and Goto refused to tap, but when he couldn't escape, the referee stopped the match.

10. Shinsuke Nakamura retained the IWGP heavyweight title beating Yoshihiro Takayama in 15:11. This was another stiff match. Nakamura doesn't have the charisma to be in this main event position, but because he's something of a shooter, they like him as world champion. To me, it's a bad sign because he's just not a guy to lead a promotion and you need more than just Tanahashi. The deal is that from the start of his career, he was picked and put on top so he's expected to be there. Takayama used hard knees, a back suplex and armbar. The match ended with a brutal exchange of strikes, and then Nakamura used his finishing Bom a ye knees four times to get the pin. After the match, Nakanishi came out and issued a challenge to Nakamura for the next title match, which takes place on 2/14 at Sumo Hall in Tokyo.

Current note: It's funny that in 2010,. New Japan had Nakamura on top here because he was a shooter, and why he didn't get over in the position is because he lacked of all things, charisma. The greatest thing that happened to his career was him going to Mexico, and instead of looking

down on it, embracing it, since it had his career.

JANUARY 4, 2011

What is annually the biggest non-WWE pro wrestling event of the year, New Japan Pro Wrestling's annual January 4th show at the Tokyo Dome, had few surprises and not a lot of major news.

Reports were the four-and-a-half hour show was filled with good matches, as the lineup on paper was strong. But it was not as good as some past shows, there was nothing that would be considered an early match of the year. The matches you expected to be really good mostly delivered to the level expected, but there was no breakout surprise match and Jeff Hardy vs. Tetsuya Naito was a disappointment. Because there were 13 matches and more talent depth than any New Japan show of the year, like a WrestleMania, most of the matches were shorter than they would be if they were held on a usual major show.

The 20th consecutive show on the date in the building, which dated back to a January 4, 1992, event in a very different wrestling environment, neither showed any signs of new life, or a decline in the Japanese industry.

The first show was in conjunction with WCW and aired as a tape delayed PPV in the U.S., and even though WCW was not doing well in the U.S. at the time, stars like Sting, the Steiner Brothers, Lex Luger and Dusty Rhodes appearing was a big deal. Now they went with TNA, and used Jeff Hardy, Rob Van Dam and Beer Money. While Hardy is a bigger star worldwide than the WCW stars were 19 years ago, that isn't the case in Japan, partially because the business in Japan is so much less popular. The annual Dome show either sold out, or came close annually from 1992 to 2002.

While the crowd was announced at a face-saving 42,000, the real number was 18,000, slightly down from last year, and along with the 2007 show, the smallest crowd for a Jan. 4 Dome show in its history. New Japan had smaller crowds in the arena on other dates in recent years. The entire upper and middle decks were closed down and even the lower deck wasn't completely full.

During intermission, the company announced its first U.S. tour, with shows on 5/13 in Rahway, NJ, at the Rec Center, 5/14 in a location in Brooklyn and 5/15 at the Arena in Philadelphia. The tour is being promoted by Jersey All Pro Wrestling, which has used Jushin Liger recently (he is their light heavyweight champion) and is scheduled to include Hiroshi Tanahashi, Liger, Prince Devitt, bookers Gedo and Jado, and Tiger Mask.

The only title change saw Hiroshi Tanahashi, 34, the company's biggest star, win the IWGP heavyweight title for a fifth time, pinning Satoshi Kojima in 21:57 after a high fly flow (frog splash). Tanahashi tied Kensuke Sasaki for second place on the all-time list, behind only Tatsumi Fujinami, who has held the title six times.

The program was typical of New Japan, something they've done so many times over the years where they get an outsider, and put the title on him for several months, building to New Japan's

biggest star representing the company on the Dome show and getting the belt back.

Kojima, 40, who started with New Japan, is a free agent, who left New Japan for All Japan in 2002 when brought over when Keiji Muto got power in All Japan. At one point Kojima was one of the top wrestlers in the world, including being the only wrestler to hold the Triple Crown and IWGP title at the same time. But like virtually all of Japan's wrestlers of his generation, the physical style took its toll and he's badly banged up from injuries and nowhere near the performer he was.

Several matches, including all that involved TNA talent, were introduced in English by Jeremy Borash. Borash has done ring announcing at four Tokyo Dome shows, but missed last year because Impact did the live show with Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair and Jeff Hardy's debut on the same day. From the New Japan standpoint, bringing Borash in, kind of like K-1 has done in the past with Michael Buffer (they didn't this year likely due to money issues) and how New Japan did in the 70s with Jimmy Lennon Sr. is to give the show a special big event feel. New Japan has talked about using him every year, whether they work with TNA or not. Borash was also shooting footage while he was there for TNA, although we are not sure whether it will be a DVD release or a Spike special. There has been nothing said about a Spike special, although Spike has aired one hour specials of the TNA matches from the Tokyo Dome in the past.

Van Dam and Hardy were both allowed to bring their wives on the trip and James Storm brought his fiancé. Hardy was in good shape from all reports and was on time for every scheduled appearance. He was hurting however, as he suffered serious burns on his butt when he did some sort of a stunt with fire that will air on an upcoming Hardy Internet show. Hardy talked about it on a video that was put up on the TNA web site as well.

1. Wataru Inoue & Tiger Mask & Tomoaki Honma & Tama Tonga beat Yujiro Takahashi & Tomohiro Ishii & Gedo & Jado in 7:33 of dark match when Inoue pinned Gedo after a spear in 7:33.
2. Koji Kanemoto & Ryusuke Taguchi beat Kenny Omega & Taichi in 8:04 when Taguchi pinned Taichi after a roll-up. Taichi had spent a long time with CMLL and was just brought back to the company. Omega worked most of the way, which is surprising since he's the one coming off an ankle injury.
3. The PPV portion of the show opened with an IWGP tag team title match where champions Giant Bernard & Karl Anderson retained over Robert Roode & James Storm from TNA and Manabu Nakanishi & Strongman (Jon Anderson, who looks like a bigger version of Scott Steiner and is a star with CMLL and New Japan has tried to push him and Nakanishi as a cult team) in 8:36. It was an American style finish as Storm went to spit beer in Anderson's face, but he ducked, and it went into Roode's face, and Anderson pinned him. Match was entertaining, but Beer Money didn't get much of a reaction and the majority of fans attending didn't know who they were since TNA either has no television, or no television that people watch, in Japan. However, their work was very good, as expected, and New Japan would like to get more dates on them. The other TNA guys were over because Van Dam was a star here in the 90s with All

Japan and from WWE television and touring. Hardy was a star from WWE. Said to be Strongman's best performance in Japan, largely due to the working ability of his opponents, and he and Nakanishi played their cult role well. Big pop for Strongman press slamming Bernard, who is probably around 350 pounds. The ring introductions for this match were in English only. Bernard cut a promo after the match saying that this proved New Japan was No. 1.

4. Mascara Dorada & La Sombra beat Jushin Liger & Hector Garza in 7:42 when Sombra pinned Liger, likely to set up a singles program between the two. This was a CMLL style match with lots of dives including two different everyone dives sequences. Liger did a lot more than he usually does when it comes to flying and the other three did some wild dives. Crowd enjoyed the match. There were missed spots as well.

Current note: Mascara Dorada is now Gran Metalik in WWE. New Japan liked him so much they brought him in full-time, and then did nothing with him. Sombra is of course, Andrade Cien Almas. He had superstar potential.

5. Hiroyoshi Tenzan beat Takashi Iizuka in 11:13 with the Anaconda vise, in a match where the stipulation was it could only end when one man choked the other unconscious. Iizuka attacked one of the television announcers before the match and tore his dress shirt off. He worked, until changing later in the show, announcing in an undershirt but still wearing his tie as a comedy spot. It was actually a set-up because later in the show the announcer was shown getting attacked and then playing with a smartphone app to relax. The finish saw a ref bump. Iizuka then went for his steel giant fingers gimmick (his trademark foreign object) and went after Tenzan. But Tenzan's corner stopped him. Tenzan made a comeback and got the Anaconda Vise on for the finish. Dull match as Tenzan's injuries have left him very limited for years.

Current note: Yes, here was a period when TV announcer Shimpei Nogami would be attacked and have his shirt torn off as part of every PPV show by Iizuka.

6. Rob Van Dam pinned Toru Yano in 11:28 in what wasn't advertised ahead of time as such, but was accepted as being a hardcore match, using a Van Daminator and a five star frog splash after putting a chair on Yano's chest. Yano opened spitting Sake in Van Dam's face. Yano hit Van Dam with a garbage can and also put a garbage can over Van Dam's head and hit it with a chair. Yano also monkey flipped Van Dam into a ladder. Yano did a promo on the screen before the match doing the thumbs to the shoulders and making fun of Van Dam. They also used an umbrella as a weapon. While they used weapons, it wasn't that wild or out of control. But it as better than most Yano matches, and the crowd reacted to Van Dam like a legitimate star.

7. Yuji Nagata beat Minoru Suzuki in 16:15 in a New Japan vs. All Japan match. Very good match, mostly stiff slaps and kicks, good submissions and both guys doing great facial expressions and was the best match thus far on the show. This had the most heat of anything thus far and the first match on the show where the audience reacted to both participants like they were big stars. They traded their best known submissions, and the finish, with Nagata using three back suplexes, came off great.

8. Prince Devitt retained the IWGP jr. heavyweight title beating Kota Ibushi in 16:22. Best

match of the show, as expected. This is the kind of a match that plays better at Korakuen Hall where fans are right on top of it. They didn't do as many insane dives as in the past, but they did great stuff inside the ring. The timing was amazing. The story was that Ibushi kept hitting finisher after finisher on Devitt. The best moves were Ibushi doing a Frankensteiner with both men standing on the top rope (instead of the usual middle rope with the other guy sitting on the top rope) and a 450. Devitt won with the Bloody Sunday DDT with both standing on the top rope. Crowd was also into this match.

Current note: This was the beginning of the modern New Japan style, Finn Balor was a major babyface star and Ibushi was already a super talent and had become a drawing card for DDT.

9. Yoshihiro Takayama & Takashi Sugiura beat Hirooki Goto & Kazuchika Okada in 12:08 when Takayama pinned Okada with the Everest German suplex. Even though it was New Japan vs. NOAH, and Sugiura is the GHC champion and was the consensus Wrestler of the Year in almost every major poll in Japan, and Goto is a big New Japan star, the crowd was kind of quiet and it was described as an okay match. Okada was billed as being from TNA, since he's based in Florida. He works dark matches and Xplosion matches and they don't deem him Impact-worthy because of being Japanese, as he's a good worker with more size than most Japanese wrestlers. He's considered to have a good future in New Japan which is why he was sent to TNA, and they did nothing, kind of like WCW when they had Yuji Nagata in the 90s and would do great TV matches but it wouldn't matter.

Current note: Yes, Okada was a regular in TNA and wasn't deemed worthy of being on television. To this day, New Japan won't do business with TNA over this slight.

10. Jeff Hardy pinned Tetsuya Naito in 11:04 with a swanton and twist of hate. Hardy in his pre-match interview said that he was going to have the greatest match in the history of the Tokyo Dome. That's scary to say going in given how many great matches have been in the building, and how great Devitt vs. Ibushi looked to be on paper and in reality. He got a huge reaction coming out, and then went out and did a match that people didn't care about. Generally it was considered fourth or fifth best of the first eight matches on PPV, as it was considered okay at best. And Naito is one of New Japan's best workers these days. One American fan noted that this match really brought home that for all the talk regarding the decline in Japanese pro wrestling, that in the ring, this really showed the working differences between a great U.S. worker and a great Japanese worker, noting that even though the business isn't popular, there are older guys like Nagata and a lot of young heavyweights who as workers are far superior to Hardy, who would be considered a strong American worker, and how they also blow away people like Miz, Wade Barrett, John Cena and the babyface versions of Edge and Randy Orton. Hardy didn't work as a face or a heel, and since TNA isn't popular, nobody knew he was a heel to begin with. Crowd also seemed surprised at the finish because they didn't build toward it.

Current note: This match really brought home how the people who would be the next generation stars of New Japan were in a different league than the top Americans then.

11. Shinsuke Nakamura pinned Go Shiozaki in 14:17 in a battle of one of New Japan's biggest

stars against one of NOAH's biggest stars. Great match with a lot of heat. For some reason, Borash did the ring introductions of this match in English. Nakamura used the Bom a Ye. Great near falls, and maybe the second or third (behind Devitt vs. Ibushi and maybe the main event) best thing on the show.

12. Togi Makabe pinned Masato Tanaka in 12:46 in another hardcore style match. Each put the other through a table once. The big spot was Makabe, on the apron, power bombing Tanaka outside the ring through a table. Tanaka had earlier given Makabe a brainbuster through a table when they were fighting on the ramp. Good match, and a lot better than most Makabe matches, but probably should have been held earlier in the show.

13. Hiroshi Tanahashi pinned Satoshi Kojima in 21:57 to win the IWGP heavyweight title. The beginning of the match was really cool, as they did a video feature showing the history of the IWGP title dating back to Antonio Inoki, showing every champion. The finish was Tanahashi doing two German suplexes, a botched sling blade, a fling crossbody off the top and then a high fly flow. Tanahashi kicked out of everything Kojima threw at him earlier. This had the most heat of any match on the show and was a very good match, coming across like a big show main event. It was slow early but picked up well in the second half.

Current note: New Japan was doing this video getting over the history and prestige of the championship in 2011. It's been eight years, and not one promotion in pro wrestling or MMA in the U.S. was copied this simple but so effective method of setting up the atmosphere and making the title feel special.

JANUARY 4, 2012

Current note: From rock bottom of interest, with 10,000 to 15,000 paid most years and even a few year period when the company was openly talking about dropping running the Tokyo Dome, this is really where I call the modern era started. Hiroshi Tanahashi was establishing himself as one of the great world champions of all-time, becoming a consistent big show performer at a consistent level that not even Ric Flair or Shawn Michaels could match. A few weeks before the show, I was told the shocking news. Tanahashi was in the eyes of booker Gedo, an established legend. He was brought the title back, but he was getting older. A new superstar had to be made and he knew the guy, Kazuchika Okada. Okada was going to beat Yoshi-Hashi quickly, and then beat Tanahashi for the title in a result that would shock everyone. The idea seemed foolhardy at the time. Okada did nothing in the U.S., and had no aura or reputation. Sure, he was a great athlete, but he didn't seem anywhere near charismatic enough for that top. Worse, Gedo had an idea for him, "The Rainmaker." He was to be a rich, young Japanese playboy, and he was none of that. In Japan, there is nothing worse than having a gimmick people see through. And on this show, while very few knew the plans, those who saw the show and knew the plan thought he had made a huge mistake. Okada would go on to win the title in a great match—the first of the modern Tanahashi vs. Okada classics. But hell, even Yujiro Takahashi could have a classic with Tanahashi in those days. That meant nothing. It was Okada's first title defense against Tetsuya Naito that followed where you started to see that maybe Gedo wasn't so far off the mark. It wasn't long before Gedo was a genius and Okada and

Tanahashi would bring New Japan up to a level it hadn't seen since the end of the glory days, and return New Japan to glory days, but this time on a worldwide basis. Still, even on this show, paid attendance was probably less than 20,000.

New Japan Pro Wrestling's 40th anniversary year opened with its biggest show of the year, the annual 1/4 Wrestle Kingdom show at the Tokyo Dome, the Japanese equivalent to WrestleMania.

IWGP champion Hiroshi Tanahashi, on the one-year anniversary of his starting his current title reign by beating Satoshi Kojima at the Dome, set the company's all-time record with his 11th title defense, pinning Minoru Suzuki in the main event before 23,000 fans (announced as 43,000). The show in many ways is like a WrestleMania where there are so many big matches that top guys end up getting limited time, and in many ways, the match caliber isn't as good as a lot of the major arena shows during the year.

But even so, this was a good show. The crowd was far from the near sellouts that were almost automatic from the company's second event at the Tokyo Dome in 1990 until business really started falling in 2002. But it was the third best crowd of the company's last eight shows at the Dome. With the exception of the 2009 show where Tanahashi represented New Japan in chasing All Japan's legendary Keiji Muto, who had a long run with New Japan's IWGP title, a far stronger main event storyline than anything this year, it was the best crowd since 2006. And that crowd for a show headlined by Brock Lesnar vs. Shinsuke Nakamura was heavily papered.

Not everything worked. Kazuchika Okada was sent to TNA to gain international experience, and then largely forgotten past a brief angle as Samoa Joe's sidekick. In that one, he dressed up like Kato from the Green Hornet cartoons, was given the name Okato, and was involved in a terrible angle with The Pope. He returned, with bleached blond hair, doing a playboy gimmick as Rainmaker Kazuchika Okada, with the idea in a battle of returnees, he'd quickly squash Yoshi-Hashi (Nobuo Yoshihashi, who has been in CMLL actually wrestling a full schedule and getting better). He did beat Yoshi-Hashi quickly, but did not look impressive in doing so. At the end of the show, after Tanahashi beat Suzuki, he came out and issued a challenge for a title match. Because of how unimpressive he had looked in his return, the people booed the angle and weren't accepting of it at all. Okada's dye job looked amateur, and he was completely unconvincing as this new cocky playboy. When he mocked Tanahashi's winning pose, it got little heat. He was booed on the way out, but it didn't feel like the right kind of heat.

Both tag team titles changed hands. As expected, Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan ended the long reign of Giant Bernard & Karl Anderson as IWGP tag team champions, which dated back to June 19, 2010. The 564-day reign was the longest in the history of the championship. Kojima & Tenzan were the company's hottest tag team before Kojima left the promotion to join All Japan.

In fact, their July 21, 2000 to September 23, 2001, title reign of 430 days was the record setter at the time, and still the third longest in history (Tenzan & Masahiro Chono broke the record at 446 days in 2002-03). When Kojima returned for his big singles run in 2010, the Kojima vs.

Tenzan feud seemed like a natural, as did making up and reforming their team.

The other title change saw Prince Devitt & Ryusuke Taguchi win the IWGP jr. tag titles for the fourth time, beating Davey Richards & Rocky Romero. Devitt & Taguchi tied Gedo & Jado for the most title reigns in history.

But the main theme of the show was New Japan vs. Outsiders. Suzuki was a free agent who they gave a winning streak to, the shooting pioneer who beat one person after another with his Karl Gotch piledriver. Tetsuya Naito, New Japan's hope to be the next Tanahashi, lost to Muto in what was billed as Wrestling Genius vs. Wrestling Genius, in the sense it was pushed as the smartest in-ring worker of the young generation against the smartest of the old generation.

Pro Wrestling NOAH's combination of GHC champion Go Shiozaki & Naomichi Marufuji beat New Japan's Shinsuke Nakamura & Toru Yano. The match was a disappointment, missing something, but they pushed the idea of a Nakamura vs. Marufuji program for this year.

Togi Makabe, New Japan's top brawler, beat free agent Yoshihiro Takayama, who is a regular with NOAH. New Japan's Hirooki Goto beat All Japan's Takashi Sugiura in a stiff match.

And in a match that ended up in a disaster, All Japan's MMA combination of Masakatsu Funaki & Masayuki Kono beat New Japan's Yuji Nagata & Wataru Inoue. The idea was to start a Funaki vs. Nagata series. However, during the match, when Nagata delivered a running knee into the corner, he landed way too stiff, breaking not only Funaki's left orbital bone, but his nose and other bones, crushing the left side of his face. Funaki needs surgery and will be out of action for six months. This is a major blow, as it not only delays that program, but will force All Japan into making major changes for this year, as Funaki was a key part of their plans, in particular the Champion Carnival tournament in April.

While most sports are declining in popularity in Japan, New Japan Pro Wrestling has started making small steps in growing over the past three years, with Tanahashi bringing in a new audience. Tanahashi has the aura of a top guy when you see him on New Japan shows, but more like a Bret Hart or a John Cena, as opposed to a Ric Flair or a Hulk Hogan or a Mitsuharu Misawa, Muto or Kenta Kobashi. But in the ring he delivers the long world title match at the end of every PPV show, usually four stars or better, although he will be hard pressed next time.

The next PPV show will be on 2/12 from Osaka Furitsu Gym, with Tanahashi vs. Okada for the title as the main event, plus rematches of both tag title bouts, with Tenzan & Kojima vs. Bernard & Anderson and Devitt & Taguchi vs. Romero & Richards. In addition, Masato Tanaka defends the IC title against Goto.

1. Tama Tonga & Captain New Japan (Hideo Saito as a babyface) beat Kyosuke Miami & Tomoaki Honma in 8:47 when Tonga pinned Mikami in the dark match.

2. Prince Devitt & Ryusuke Taguchi beat Davey Richards & Rocky Romero in 12:44 to win the IWGP jr. tag titles. Devitt & Taguchi's name as a team is Apollo 55, and they came out wearing cheap looking astronaut costumes. I guess it sounded like a good idea on paper. Pretty much a million moves with for the most part almost flawless execution. Romero and Richards did a

double tope to open. Richards put Taguchi in a combination Texas cloverleaf and hammerlock until Devitt saved. Devitt & Taguchi did a double running flip dove over the top. Taguchi did a twisting splash on Romero and Devitt did double foot stomp on him but Richards saved. Richards put Taguchi on his shoulders and Romero came off the top with a knee. Devitt did a double foot stomp on Richards to break up the pin. At another point, Romero gave Devitt a Frankensteiner off the top rope while in the opposite corner, Richards gave Taguchi a superplex followed by a second suplex but Devitt saved. The finish saw Richards kick Taguchi in the head twice and went for a power bomb, which Taguchi turned into a Toyota roll-up for the pin. ****

3. Jushin Liger & Tiger Mask & Kushida & Mascara Dorada beat Atlantis & Valiente & Taka Michinoku & Taichi in 10:18. This was a fun Lucha Libre style match. Liger came out in an all white costume, looking like a giant icicle. He also got one of the biggest reactions on the show as people see him as a legend. They pushed the idea that Liger was the New Japan jr. legend and Atlantis, now is 49, was pushed as Mr. CMLL, a living legend, like someone like Peter Aerts of his world. Liger & Kushida did the old Mascaras Brothers double cross chop on Taichi and Michinoku, which is a spot that Japanese fans love because it's Mil Mascaras of the 70s. The heels started working over Liger. Taichi first tried to unmask Liger but Tiger Mask saved. Taichi then tried to unmask Tiger Mask. Then he went after Dorada's mask but was stopped. At one point Taichi used an Iron claw to the groin of Kushida. The ref broke that up as well, stating it was not a legal hold. Thank god because that's not comfortable to watch, even it was Fritz Von Erich's finishing move. That would be used to blow off feuds. Others involved are the unstoppable Johnny Valentine and Gene Kiniski. Then we had the dive sequence, with Liger doing a plancha on Taichi, Atlantis with a tope on both, Tiger Mask a plancha on all three, Michinoku with his old springboard plancha from his heyday and Kushida with a twisting plancha on everyone. Dorada then did a running twisting dive on everyone. Valiente then botched his spot, and changed to doing an Asai moonsault on everyone. Atlantis did two spinning backbreakers on Tiger Mask and put him in the torture rack but Liger saved. Valiente did a tombstone into a codebreaker on Liger for a near fall. He did a moonsault, but Liger got his feet up, and Liger used a Liger bomb followed by a brainbuster on Valiente for the pin.

***3/4

4. Kazuchika Okada beat Yoshi-hashii (Nobuo Yoshihashi) in 4:37 after a clothesline. With his bad looking hair dye job, Okada looked like a male Shinobu Kandori (a butch women's wrestling star of the 90s). Okada is tall for a Japanese guy, maybe 6-3 and does a high dropkick so he's a good athlete. But he didn't put it together here. Okada won after a missile dropkick an emerald frosien and a lariat. Nobody expected Yoshi-hashii to be pinned after that lariat and the match had built up no momentum. It was supposed to be this dominant win but came across as anything but. *

5. Masakatsu Funaki & Masayuki Kono (All Japan) beat Yuji Nagata & Wataru Inoue in 6:34. Funaki & Kono came out with their All Japan flag. This was Funaki's first time back in New Japan since he quit the promotion to join the UWF in the late 80s. They pushed that he was this teenage superstar in New Japan at one point. He got a star reaction coming back. Focus was Funaki vs. Nagata. Nagata is so freaking awesome, even at almost 44, he is one of the best

workers in the world and easily the most underrated great worker of the last decade. Nagata's facials when he got Funaki in the Nagata armlock were great and the crowd was going crazy at that point until Kono saved. Funaki and Inoue went back-and-forth before Funaki used a high kick and Inoue sold it like he was knocked out and got the pin. Post match saw Funaki, whose left eye was swollen from the orbital break and whose nose was bleeding badly, start slapping Nagata and head-butted him as they did a pull-apart. ***

6. Shelton Benjamin & MVP beat Masato Tanaka & Yujiro Takahashi in 9:41. Gedo & Jado came out with Tanaka & Takahashi as they are all part of The Complete Players (a takeoff on ECW's Impact Players). Benjamin looked good here and got over. Tanaka at one point came off the top rope with a plancha to the floor putting MVP through a table. Tanaka also used kendo stick shots on MVP's body and also attacked Benjamin. Benjamin at one point did a flip dive on Gedo and Jado. MVP did three straight German suplexes on Takahashi. Tanaka used the brainbuster on MVP but Benjamin saved. Takahashi used a German suplex on MVP for a near fall. MVP had Takahashi in a hammerlock crossface when Gedo & Jado got up on the apron. MVP let go and knocked them off the apron. Benjamin did his running jump to the top rope with a belly-to-belly suplex on Takahashi and then used the downward spiral on Takahashi. MVP then put Takahashi in the crossface for the submission. ***1/4

7. Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan beat Giant Bernard & Karl Anderson in 12:40. Kojima & Tenzan came from different sides of the stage, symbolically like they had taken long separate roads and were now back together, meeting at the center and shaking hands. Crowd was really into them as a team. A funny entrance saw Anderson come out with a Machine Gun (that's his nickname) and started firing supposed shots at the video wall. The video wall showed the Tokyo Sports awards where he and Bernard didn't win tag team of the year. Anderson had complained long and loud how Tokyo Sports robbed them since they were both the GHC and IWGP tag champs at the same time, but they picked Yuji Okabayashi & Daisuke Sekimoto, who only held All Japan's secondary All-Asia tag titles this past year. All action very good match. Kojima now does the Kobashi style chops in the corner over and over on both guys. Near fall after near fall. Bernard used a last ride power bomb on Tenzan but he kicked out. Bernard set up the Bernard driver, but Tenzan escaped. Kojima nailed Bernard with the rabbit lariat. Kojima & Tenzan delivered the 3-D to Anderson, and then Kojima knocked Bernard down with a lariat, and Tenzan followed with a moonsault on Bernard for the title win. All four shook hands after the match. Considering how banged up Kojima & Tenzan are at this stage of their careers, you really can't ask for more from them. ***1/2

8. Hirooki Goto pinned Takashi Sugiura (NOAH) in 12:25. Goto came out wearing a pink wig that went to the ground. This was slower than the previous matches, but they went back-and-forth with the hard elbows standing. Sugiura's big spot was a German suplex into the corner. Sugiura is one of these who in his face just makes it seem like his body is hurting all the time but he's got that amateur wrestling mentality of fighting through it and knowing nothing but stiff work. Last few minutes were really good. Sugiura used a German suplex, and a shining wizard for near falls. He used a dragon suplex as well. He went for the Olympic slam but Goto armdragged his way out of it. Sugiura used hard elbows and then hard slaps. Goto back with a

head-butt and a back suplex, a killer lariat, a head-butt and a short lariat, but Sugiura kicked out. Goto won with the shoten kai, which is like Matt Morgan's hellevator move. ***1/2

9. Togi Makabe pinned Yoshihiro Takayama (free agent/NOAH) in 9:15. Takayama is completely physically beaten down. He looks totally out of shape, like he's too beat up to train. He used to have a body when he first started. But he's a legend and because he's big, has been a star forever, is protected in booking, and used to be great, he's still effective to make a big match. Takayama did a dropkick which got a reaction from the crowd. He did a double-arm suplex into an armbar, but Makabe made the ropes. Takayama finally hit his signature German suplex, then went for a second but Makabe broke it throwing a flurry of backward elbows and used a German suplex of his own for a near fall. Makabe used a German superplex, which Takayama fought, but Makabe finally got it, and then came off the top with the King Kong kneedrop for the pin. **

10. Go Shiozaki & Naomichi Marufuji (NOAH) beat Shinsuke Nakamura & Toru Yano in 15:10. Yano's gimmick is he tries to cut opponents' hair and went for it with Shiozaki but he got away. Yano undid the padding in one of the corner turnbuckles and whipped Marufuji's back into it. Yano followed with a brainbuster for a near fall. They went back-and-forth but it never got that heat. Marufuji isn't nearly what he was before his missing so much time this year with injuries. Shiozaki is getting pushed as GHC champion and he's a technically good wrestler but he's missing superstar charisma at this point. Marufuji did a springboard coast-to-coast dropkick on Nakamura while Shiozaki pinned Yano after the Go flasher. Marufuji and Nakamura did a post-match staredown where they were pressing heads on each other, so this should continue. ***3/4

11. Keiji Muto (All Japan) pinned Tetsuya Naito in 22:35. Muto got the biggest reaction of anyone on the show. They did a slow start with the long headlock, one high spot 5:00 and back to the headlock forever. This was the Muto doing Johnny Valentine special. Nothing happened early except Muto doing like a million dragon screws and low dropkicks to Naito's knee. It's so redundant, but suddenly, at 15:00, the crowd was really into everything. It was probably the second most compelling match on the show, behind only the main event. Muto also had long figure four spots. When you watch how Muto does so few moves and every move is so over, it really shows how big that first Takada match was with the dragon screw and figure four, because we're 16-and-a-half years later and every time he does a move from that match people react. Naito did a spin kick after blocking a dragon screw. Muto tried another one but Naito hit the enzuigiri. He tried to pick Muto up but he collapsed under the weight because of knee damage. He got a Frankensteiner off the top, an enzuigiri and German suplex for near falls before missing the stardust press. Muto hit two shining wizards and the dragon screw. Then Muto did a shining wizard to the back. Naito got a surprise front rolling cradle for a near fall. Muto came back with another dropkick to the right knee. He went for another shining wizard, but it was blocked and Naito used a rolling reverse cradle and bridge for a near fall. Muto came back with a lateral guillotine and another shining wizard, and then another shining wizard, but Naito kicked out. Muto then used a backbreaker and got the pin after a moonsault. The crowd seeing Muto, at 49, doing a moonsault, went pretty wild. Muto offered Naito a handshake, but Naito refused, and left limping. Naito walked to the back like losing was a complete disgrace.

and it was like he had lost the biggest match of his career. ***1/4

12. Hiroshi Tanahashi retained the IWGP heavyweight title pinning Minoru Suzuki (free agent) in 25:59. In the pre-match video, they showed shots of Suzuki from the 80s having left New Japan with Funaki to train under Karl Gotch. They built to showing the angle for this match where the two shook hands and then Suzuki snapped and choked him out. I really also like how (and they do this every PPV show) before the IWGP title match, they on the screen show a series of photos of the legends who have held the title, making the belt seem important, showing people like Inoki, Fujinami, Vader, Lesnar, Sapp, Muto, Hashimoto, Chono to the present. They started both throwing punches working the body. Suzuki did an abdominal stretch on the top rope but had to break because it was on the ropes. He threw a running kick that knocked Suzuki off the top rope to the floor. Tanahashi back with a dropkick sending Suzuki out of the ring, but missed a dive. Suzuki started choking on the floor. Tanahashi escaped the choke. Suzuki teased a Gotch piledriver on the floor but Tanahashi backdropped out of it. Suzuki laid him out with a running kick and teased that Tanahashi would lose the title via count out (you can do that here) but Tanahashi beat the count. Suzuki did some Fujiwara style head-butts. At another point, Tanahashi tried to send Suzuki into the ropes but Suzuki wouldn't go, which is the "He's not doing pro wrestling" spot that works for him and gets people into the idea his match is serious. It wouldn't work for others elsewhere, but you can feel the difference when he does it. Tanahashi was throwing weak punches and Suzuki was laughing at him. Tanahashi was back with a crossbody off the middle rope, flying forearm and swanton for a near fall. Suzuki then hit an awesome dropkick that shocked the crowd. Tanahashi did a spectacular plancha outside the ring and almost overshot Suzuki on the floor. He landed bad and was bleeding from the mouth, which may have been from the dropkick earlier. They teased Suzuki being counted out. As Suzuki came through the ropes, he snatched an armbar in the ropes, but had to break at five. Tanahashi went for a dragon screw but Suzuki blocked it and turned it into an armbar, which was an awesome spot. Suzuki threw knee after knee in the corner but missed a running kick. Tanahashi did another crossbody off the top, went for the high fly flow but Suzuki got his knees up. Suzuki was slapping the hell out of Tanahashi, and Tanahashi would try and fire back but Suzuki would do the Anderson Silva quick head movement to make him look foolish. He got a choke twice. On the second one, he let go to do the Gotch piledriver. Tanahashi kicked out at two. Really they spent months building up this spot since that was the move Suzuki used to beat everyone on the way to his shot. Tanahashi ducked a punch and hit a dragon suplex, and then did a falcon arrow into a dragon suplex for a near fall. Tanahashi went for another high fly flow but Suzuki kicked out. They were on their knees trading punches, a sick head-but by Suzuki, and slaps. This time Tanahashi started finally getting the better of the slaps and landed two big shots, then blocked a choke attempt and it the necktie lariat (sling blade). Tanahashi went up and hit a high fly flow to the back, then went back up to the top for a high fly flow to the front and got the pin. This wasn't as good as some of Tanahashi's defenses in recent months with Naito, Nakamura and Nagata but every move in this match counted and both guys did their unique styles. Not a match of the year, but an excellent big show world title match. ****

JANUARY 4, 2013

Current note: The myth of the Tokyo Dome was the place New Japan has always had its greatest matches was never the case. But in the last six years, that has changed. This was the start of that change.

It's been years, really since the fall of Pro Wrestling NOAH and the WWE burying AAA and CMLL in their own countries, ending the local wrestling boom period, that a pro wrestling group other than WWE has had anything but a murky future.

But at almost the same time that changed, after the finish of New Japan's 2013 version of Wrestle Kingdom, the January 4th Tokyo Dome show that is the Japanese answer to WrestleMania, within hours everything is questionable once again.

New Japan, on the backs of tremendous monthly big shows and a killer bring of main events involving charismatic IWGP champions Hiroshi Tanahashi and the person who it appeared would be his eventual successor as the group's top star, Kazuchika Okada, seemed to be building momentum all year. From a business standpoint, the debut of Internet PPV in Japan, a country where traditional PPV has been very limited due to how few households in the country have access to it, has opened up a game changing revenue stream.

But the big test would come at the Tokyo Dome, the show that really is the barometer of where the company truly stands. This year's show drew a crowd announced as 29,000, which doesn't sound impressive since they usually announce 40,000 or more, ridiculously exaggerated figures. But this was a real number in the building.

It was also the best Tokyo Dome show the promotion has ever put on, a four-and-a-half hour show that somehow never felt like it was going too long. The first half of the show was just so-so, but the second half ranked it among the greatest pro wrestling shows of all-time.

Sounds great.

The next day, New Japan Chairman, Takaaki Kidani, the controversial architect of this revival when his Bushiroad company purchased New Japan Pro Wrestling from video game maker Yukes, announced he was resigning.

It appeared this was an emotional power play. On one hand, Kidani was an enthusiastic supporter of the product, trying to come up with new ways, such as iPPV, which in October expanded its distribution live around the world, even if interest outside of Japan is very limited. On the other hand, his hero in wrestling was Eric Bischoff, and he wanted to be part of the show itself, which has been an Achilles heel of many promoters.

According to one person very close to the situation, Kidani had the attitude that he has a right to have a say in every single program and angle. The company was built on the wrestlers and bookers controlling the wrestling end of the product. The hot button issue was using non-New Japan wrestlers with MMA backgrounds for an invasion angle.

Kidani, like Bischoff, fashioned bringing back Antonio Inoki to do a shooters invasion of New

Japan. He actually started in this direction with the signing of Kazushi Sakuraba and Katsuyori Shibata. Reportedly, even Gedo and Jado, the company bookers, weren't aware of any talks until the announcement came out in the media that they had been signed.

The problem is years back, when Inoki was in charge, he had a dated mentality that the reason wrestling had fallen from its heights during his prime was because the wrestlers didn't have credibility with the public as being the legitimately toughest guys around. To rectify, Inoki would bring in guys from MMA who had a pro wrestling background, and have them go over the wrestlers and often use them on top. Like a lot of things in wrestling, conceptually, outsiders against New Japan stars like Inoki were among the building blocks of the company. But overdoing it killed the in-ring product when you had wrestlers who could not really bring out the emotions of the crowd in a worked environment, or understood how to build and peak a match, in your main events. Kidani's ideas brought back the memories of what many think took New Japan down in the first place.

However, in the specific instance with Sakuraba and Shibata, since there were only two of them, and both started out as pro wrestlers and understood making a match, their matches were different from everything else on the show, and got over huge. They were in the second and third from the top matches. While there is no question the 11-month long Tanahashi vs. Okada program as the top two men in the promotion battling for a top spot that they had built up meant something peaking was the main course of the show, Sakuraba and Shibata's matches were strong appetizers.

It's hard to say what would happen if Kidani had his way. Perhaps the New Japan crew finally got pro wrestling back over, and if it was kept under control, it could be a great storyline to a certain degree. The problem is, wrestling fans at the end of the day want to see exciting wrestling. And New Japan fans have a very high standard of product expectations based on the quality of the last couple of years, particularly this last year. It's a level very difficult to maintain unless you have a show filled with top caliber workers.

Sakuraba and Shibata had won every match leading to the Dome. Without knowing anything, I had figured that Sakuraba would lose to Shinsuke Nakamura in the IC title match, because it's the big show and really this is where Sakuraba should top out at. Shibata, younger and healthier, who is actually excellent at working his unique style, I figured was going over Togi Makabe. Makabe is the kind of wrestler who can get a title shot, and has enough credibility that beating him can elevate you to winning a title shot. Makabe and Shibata had a nice program, and I figured Shibata would win, and he'd top out with the money match with Tanahashi, New Japan's top babyface, whether it be for the title or not. After hitting his money drawing peak, then he could move down and Makabe could get his win back.

Kidani wanted Sakuraba and Shibata to win, and also wanted to be in Sakuraba's corner when he won the Intercontinental title (which in New Japan right now with Nakamura as champion is very much like the Randy Savage/Don Muraco era IC championship). The conflict between the bookers and the wrestlers resulted in Sakuraba and Shibata losing, Kidani quitting, and thus far neither has been announced for any future shows.

It was noted that Bushiroad still owns New Japan, but when the guy who owns the big company has a major personal involvement and enthusiasm, they became a priority in the big company. If he washes his hands of involvement, that can go in the other direction.

The public statement is that this show proved New Japan had turned the corner, pro wrestling had been built to be more popular mainstream in Japan than it has been in years, and now he can leave the company to run on its own.

There was also a lot of talk about the main event. It was highly controversial when the decision was made to give the totally unproven Okada the IWGP title last February after Tanahashi had a one year plus run of super main events and building the prestige of the title and the aura of big show main events. But Okada's combination of ring presence and athletic ability, plus working with great people, led to a series of main events that reached and even exceeded the high standards Tanahashi set. While Tanahashi regaining it was the way to go, he is the superstar of the group, June was probably a few months early. Okada then won the G-1 tournament, without beating Tanahashi, who was eliminated in the match before the finals by Karl Anderson. Okada beat Anderson to win New Japan's first ever G-1 briefcase.

The road to the Dome had big shows with Tanahashi defending on top, and Okada defending his top contendership and Dome title shot in singles matches underneath. Throughout the big show runs since August, it was clear what the ultimate match was. Both men continued to win on big shows to where the match done twice before in the last year became not just your WrestleMania main event, but your special dream match that elevated the event.

There are two schools of thought. It was Tanahashi on top who built business and was the star who people were paying to see on top. Business is still growing so why make the change? The flip side is Tanahashi is made and established, and there are no new big challengers on the horizon, particularly having knocked Shibata off earlier in the show. With Okada, you have several matches they didn't get to on the last run, and there's probably money in Tanahashi having the long chase before he gets the shot and wins it back.

But Tanahashi won a classic main event that went 33:34, starting at the four hour mark of the show, that tore the house down. To me, since the match built on spots from the previous two matches, it very slightly exceeded them and was a genuine match of the year candidate. Yet it could be argued it wasn't even the best match, with the sensational three-way where Prince Devitt retained the IWGP jr. title over former champions Low Ki and Kota Ibushi, and the Nakamura vs. Sakuraba IC title bout. They all tore down the house. In all, I had five four-star or better matches, and what made them is every one of those matches was completely different than the other.

Yuji Nagata vs. Minoru Suzuki was a battle of veterans who have gone at it for years, a psychological masterpiece that should be viewed in every wrestling school in the U.S. to learn the value of facial expressions and timing. The three-way jr. match was your high flying high spot oriented New Japan jr. style featuring three incredible talents. Makabe vs. Shibata came off like a fight. Nakamura vs. Sakuraba had the aura of a great MMA match, even though it was

worked, they took you into that realm based on what they did and how they worked. The main event was a totally awesome world title match, the long Brisco vs. Funk, Misawa vs. Kobashi, Flair vs. Steamboat aura where you've got the two "best guys in the world" battling for a protected world title where the result matters.

The top three matches aired on TV-Asahi from 1:10 a.m. to 2:10 a.m. on a several hour tape delay, doing a strong for that time slot 3.4 rating.

We don't have the most important number, which is the Japanese iPPV numbers. The October and November shows both hit in the 50-55,000 range, and they were normal PPVs and this was the equivalent of Mania, so the number had to be way larger. Outside of Japan, the total was 1,208 at press time, almost double the first three shows. Given the poll results, a very significant percentage of those were Observer subscribers. They still have to figure out something better than what they do when there are entrance songs they don't have the rights to and you just have the sound completely turned off, not down, but off, for a minute or two at a time. This can be at the finish so you can't hear crowd pops past a split second after a win, or reactions to people coming out.

The next iPPV will be 2/20 from the Hiroshima Sun Plaza Arena. Tanahashi vs. Karl Anderson for the IWGP title is the main event. Anderson's team lost on this show, and he's lost singles matches to Okada (twice) and Nakamura in recent months. Tanahashi asked for this match in his in-ring promo after beating Okada, noting he had lost to Anderson in G-1 and hadn't had a chance to avenge it. The other matches announced are Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr. defending the IWGP tag titles against Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima, Prince Devitt against usual tag team partner Ryusuke Taguchi for the IWGP jr. title and Alex Shelley & Kushida vs. Rocky Romero & Alex Koslov for the IWGP jr. tag titles. There was talk of Okada vs. Suzuki. Nakamura may defend, but he's first got a title match on 1/19 at Korakuen Hall against La Sombra on one of the annual Fantasticmania joint shows with CMLL.

There are questions regarding a lot of the foreigners. Shelley, Smith and Archer appear safe. Anderson has had talks with Tensai (his tag team partner in New Japan) about coming to WWE. Tanahashi even talked about it publicly about how good Anderson is and that they'd want to keep him. It's known Benjamin has talked with WWE. MVP is still under contract but many believe he'll eventually go back to WWE. Low Ki worked the show in a suit dressed up as Agent 47 from the Hitman video games. While he did a great job, it wasn't what New Japan wanted and there is a lot of questions regarding his future, although New Japan is the best fit for him at this point if he wants to stay in pro wrestling at any level.

The 2013 New Japan Cup, a single elimination singles tournament, will run from 3/11 to 3/23, with the winner getting an IWGP title shot on what is scheduled as the third iPPV of the year, on 4/7 from Sumo Hall.

Their business is the Japanese market, but for the U.S. market, that's tough with everyone in the world doing iPPVs (Dragon Gate USA, ROH and probably tons of others) and it's the early morning before Mania. The main event will be the New Japan Cup winner against the IWGP

champion (presumably Hiroshi Tanahashi).

They also announced that the G-1 Climax finals on iPPV will be on 8/15, and that this year they are going back to running the last two nights at Sumo Hall, as they've booked 8/14 there. That's another sign they see business as being on the upswing.

Besides the wrestling, the show had the WrestleMania style celebrity tie-ins. As much if not more than any of the matches, the show stealer was Ayumi Nakamura, a 46-year-old recording star (I was told for a U.S. equivalent, she'd be like Pat Benatar), who was huge from the mid-80s through the 90s, and still a major star. She wrote and sang "Kaze Ni Nare," which is Minoru Suzuki's theme song, in the early 90s, which is probably the best entrance music song ever written for a wrestler. This was the first time she had ever performed the song, for Suzuki's ring entrance against Nagata, at a show.

Also appearing was a rock band called The Breakerz, who are pretty big right now. The lead singer, Daigo, is a big star and is also the grandson of former prime minister (equivalent to president) Noburu Takeshita. One of the girls from AKB48 was also there as a guest commentator. They are currently a big pop idol singing and dancing girls group.

1. Wataru Inoue & Captain New Japan & Tama Tonga beat Tomohiro Ishii & Yoshi-Hashi & Jado in 5:58. Decent opener. Tonga was the standout doing his imitations of Jimmy Snuka high spots. At one point Jado and Ishii were running together to give him a double clothesline and he leap frogged over their arms. Tonga used a guillotine on Jado, dropped down and pinned him. Tonga does the Flair "Whoo" which the crowd does back and also did the old Johnny B. Badd deal where he says, "I'm a bad man." Tonga came out with his CMLL tag team title belt and after winning talked about being CMLL champion. *3/4

2. Kushida & Bushi & Ryusuke Taguchi beat Jushin Liger & Tiger Mask & Hiromu Takahashi in 7:12. Good stuff with Taguchi and Tiger Mask. A few near falls and saves. With everyone else fighting outside the ring, Bushi pinned Takahashi with the 450 splash. **1/2

Current note: Hiromu Takahashi in the Dome as a young wrestler just there to do the job for future tag team partner Bushi.

3. Akebono & Strongman & MVP & Manabu Nakanishi beat Bob Sapp & Toru Yano & Takashi Iizuka & Yujiro Takahashi in 7:53. Takahashi did a promo before the match talking about how Sapp knocked out Akebono the last time they met (a famous kickboxing match on the 2003 New Year's Eve show, maybe the biggest match of its kind in Japan as far as mainstream interest since Ali vs. Inoki). TV announcer Shinpei Nogami came out with Nakanishi's team, since Yano and especially Iizuka always bully him and tear his shirt off. MVP came out shooting photos with his phone. He learned wrestling watching Japanese tapes so to him, this was like being on WrestleMania. Nogami was kind of the focal point of the match. They built to Sapp vs. Akebono who would do the big man running body blocks with neither going down. Nakanishi got Sapp up for the torture rack when Iizuka hit Nakanishi in the back with a chair. Iizuka and Yano choked Nakanishi with a chair. Nakanishi did a double Northern lights suplex on them. Nakanishi gave Iizuka a German suplex and Akebono splashed him for the pin. Match was

pretty bad. Strongman then held Iizuka so Nogami could give him this bad looking running clothesline. Strongman then threw Iizuka out of the ring. Nobody did much of anything. *1/4

4. Masato Tanaka retained the Never Open Weight championship pinning Shelton Benjamin in 6:41. Tanaka looks in good shape physically but facially is starting to show his age. Good athletic match, but silly because of the blatant interference of Yujiro Takahashi, and way too short. Benjamin did a running flip dive early. Benjamin ducked the sliding D, came back with a spin kick, and a superkick. Takahashi then held Benjamin and Tanaka ran after him for a clothesline, but Benjamin moved and Tanaka clotheslined Takahashi off the apron. But as Benjamin was taking over, Takahashi hit him with a kendo stick from outside the ring. Benjamin came back with the ankle lock. Takahashi got on the top rope. Benjamin let go of the ankle lock, jumped from the ring to the top rope and threw Takahashi with a belly-to-belly superplex. But when Benjamin turned around, Tanaka nailed him with the Sliding D for the pin. **3/4

5. Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr., the Killer Elite Squad, retained the IWGP tag titles beating Swords & Guns, Hirooki Goto & Karl Anderson in 10:52. Archer, who does the aggressive big foreigner patterned after Bruiser Brody, is nicknamed The American Psycho and came to the ring on a Harley. Archer & Smith Jr. both came out wearing masks and they had Taka Michinoku in their corner. Archer did the Undertaker's old school rope walk and sledge on Goto. Anderson nailed Smith with two jumping front kicks. Smith used a Tiger suplex on Anderson for a near fall. Archer choke slammed Anderson for a near fall. Anderson used a TKO off the middle rope on Archer for a near fall. Crowd was into this the most of anything so far, particularly Goto's clotheslines. They traded near falls for a few minutes. Smith used a hard power bomb on Goto. Then Anderson used the gun stun on Smith for a near fall. It ended with Smith & Archer doing a double-team power bomb, the killer bomb, first on Goto, then on Anderson, and then gave another to Goto and Smith pinned him. ***1/2

6. Yuji Nagata pinned Minoru Suzuki in 17:03. Excellent match. They traded elbows like crazy then front kicks. Taichi, who was Suzuki's second, hit Nagata with a chair to the back. Taichi, who has genuine star potential, then was hitting the young boys at ringside with chairs. The ref kicked Taichi out of ringside while Suzuki was choking Nagata with a chair. Nagata used kicks and exploder suplexes. Nagata used the crossface, but Suzuki grabbed the ankle and got an ankle lock to break it. Suzuki did running kicks to the chest. Nagata would roll his eyes back and make these great facial expressions and sit up like Undertaker used to do. Suzuki slapped the hell out of Nagata, probably 25 unanswered slaps before getting the choke. Nagata flipped him over. Suzuki kept working for it. Nagata twice blocked the Gotch piledriver. Nagata with a running knee and got the armbar. Nagata let go when Taichi showed back up. Nagata let go of the arm and kicked Taichi off the apron. They traded hard slaps. Really, even though they were slaps, they jar the head too much in Japanese wrestling. Nagata started kicking Suzuki's left elbow over and over, hurting his left arm. Unreal psychology here. Nagata then got the Nagata armlock on while his eyes were bulging out. Super stuff. Suzuki got a rope break. Suzuki went for a choke but Nagata got out with a hard slap that stunned Suzuki. Nagata then used his bridging back suplex for the pin. ****

7. Prince Devitt retained the IWGP jr. title over Low Ki and Ryusuke Taguchi in 14:45. Low Ki was amazing working in the suit. One of the better three-way matches I've ever seen. Ibushi did a huracanrana on Devitt and then a moonsault off the middle rope to the floor on Low Ki. Devitt did a running flip dive on both. All kinds of great moves here. Ibushi did a twisting moonsault off the top onto both guys. Ibushi with a double moonsault on Devitt and a half nelson German suplex on him for near falls. Far too many great spots to list. Finally Low Ki took off his suit jacket and did a Ki Krusher on Ibushi. Devitt then came two-thirds of the way across the ring with a double foot stomp onto Low Ki for a near fall. Devitt tried a Bloody Sunday DDT off the top rope but Low Ki knocked him off the top and he landed upside down with his feet tied in the ropes, in the tree of woe position. Ibushi then did a top rope huracanrana on Low Ki for an awesome near fall. He went for the Phoenix splash but Low Ki moved and Ibushi landed on his feet but Devitt did double foot stomp onto Ibushi. Low Ki hit Devitt with a Suwa dropkick for a near fall. Low Ki went for a top rope Ki Krusher on Devitt, but Ibushi kicked Low Ki off the top rope. Devitt then pinned Ibushi with a Bloody Sunday DDT off the top rope. ****1/2

8. Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima beat Keiji Muto & Shinjiro Otani in 15:36. They showed Shinya Hashimoto on the big screen. Hashimoto, who died in 2005, may have sold out the Tokyo Dome more than any wrestler in history. Originally his son, Daichi Hashimoto, was set to be Muto's partner, but he suffered a broken arm a couple of weeks ago. Fans were chanting "Hashimoto." Hachiro Tanaka, the ring announcer from the 80s and 90s, was brought back since these four were all old school New Japan guys. Otani came out with Daichi Hashimoto to Shinya's entrance music that got a big reaction. Muto got the biggest pop coming out of anyone thus far on the show. This was four veterans with trademark spots that the crowd was popping for. All four are old and physically beaten up. All the spots were getting over until the end when Muto kept doing shining wizards and dragon screws to the point people didn't care. He just kept doing them. But everything else was working. At one point Muto did four shining wizards on Tenzan. Otani used the spiral bomb on Tenzan but Kojima saved. Muto did yet another shining wizard on Kojima. Kojima came back with a lariat to Muto and then they did a double-team 3-D on Otani. Tenzan was bleeding from the mouth. Kojima was nailing both men with lariats and Tenzan pinned Otani after a moonsault. Otani had to be helped out. Hashimoto then got in Tenzan's face and slapped him and Tenzan retaliated with a short head-butt on Hashimoto. It looked like they were setting up Muto & Hashimoto vs. Tenzan & Kojima. ***1/4

9. Togi Makabe pinned Katsuyori Shibata in 8:37. Some great creative stuff. Shibata got a mount position and started with head-butts like old school Mark Coleman. Then Makabe got on top and started doing head-butts. They traded elbows. Shibata with knees and kicks and threw down the ref. This match had great crowd heat, best so far on the show. Shibata used a choke. He let go to deliver a penalty kick (American football isn't big, same move would be called a field goal or a kickoff here). Makabe collapsed before the kick came. He went for another penalty kick, but Makabe was playing possum and clotheslined the hell out of Shibata. He knocked Shibata off the apron, and then gave him a rabbit lariat (to the back of the head) that knocked Shibata into the post headfirst. Makabe power bombed Shibata through a thick table and the place went crazy. Makabe used a German suplex but Shibata kicked out at one. Makabe

did a lariat but Shibata didn't sell. Finish saw Makabe go for a lariat but Shibata ducked and put on a choke. Makabe used elbows to the gut to break the choke. Makabe hit Shibata with a sick lariat that knocked him down. Makabe came off the top rope with the King Kong kneedrop to the back of Shibata's head for the pin. ****

10. Shinsuke Nakamura pinned Kazushi Sakuraba to retain the IC title in 11:12. It started slow for a few minutes until Nakamura slapped Sakuraba in the face. Sakuraba then unloaded on him with all kinds of slaps. This turned into a great slap fight and Nakamura with knees. Nakamura was down and Sakuraba did a jumping over the guard stomp and then used a choke. Nakamura got out and landed all kinds of knees in the corner. Sakuraba was outside the ring and got the choke, but had to break. Sakuraba with slaps, body punches and a German suplex. The unreal spot you almost have to see is Nakamura shooting in for a quick takedown and Sakuraba landing a knee to the head that was like the famous knee Mirko Cro Cop gave Kazuyuki Fujita. The crowd went nuts but I don't care how much it got over, that move done that way was not a good risk. It's amazing Nakamura wasn't knocked out cold. It was even worse looking in slow mo. Sakuraba slapped the hell out of him and put Nakamura in a triangle. Nakamura got out with a sick knee to the head that you would have to see to believe. He went for the Bom a Ye (a running knee) but Sakuraba side stepped it. Sakuraba went for an armbar but Nakamura got out. Sakuraba got mount and threw palm blows and went for a Kimura. Nakamura spun out and went for an armbar. Nakamura picked him up on his shoulders and gave him a falcon arrow, kind of like a Michinoku driver Sakuraba maneuvered back into a Kimura. Nakamura was doing knees to the head while Sakuraba had side control (Frank Shamrock vs. Renzo Gracie on the first Showtime card is what they were copying). Sakuraba spun into an armbar. Nakamura escaped and dropped a knee, hit the Bom a Ye and Sakuraba kicked out just after the ref counted three. An amazing match. ****1/2

Notes: To this day, I'm still amazed at this match. It was the best pro wrestling match of Sakuraba's career, and where you really see just how good Nakamura could be.

11. Hiroshi Tanahashi retained the IWGP heavyweight title pinning Kazuchika Okada in 33:34. This was a classic world title match. They started slow with headlocks and hammerlocks for several minutes. Tanahashi got a near fall with a crossbody off the middle rope. Okada worked on the head and neck for several minutes. Tanahashi came back with elbows and a hard slap. After a skin-the-cat by Tanahashi, Okada came back with a flapjack for a near fall but missed a senton. Tanahashi back with a flying forearm, then a chop block on the left knee. Tanahashi used a dragon screw to work on the knee. Okada escaped outside the ring and Tanahashi with a plancha off the top to the floor. Okada back with a dragon screw and a DDT on the top of Tanahashi's head. Okada did his kravats and pretzel hold. He broke it to deliver more elbows and went back to the kravats. The move is called the DID. Tanahashi made the ropes. Great spot as Okada came off the top with an elbow but Tanahashi got his knees up. Tanahashi took over, but Okada dropkicked Tanahashi to the floor. They ended up on the ramp. Okada went for a tombstone piledriver, but Tanahashi got out. Okada went for a running wind sprint clothesline but Tanahashi countered when he got there and nailed the sling blade on the ramp. Tanahashi then used a sling blade in the ring, a falcon arrow and went for the high fly flow, but Okada got

his knees up. Okada did his reverse neckbreaker drop, which is an Emerald Frosien except dropping the neck on the knee like a backbreaker, except to the back of the neck. Okada used the Attitude Adjustment, which in Japan is called "Heavy Rain." Okada then used the Randy Savage elbow off the top for a near fall. He posed for the rainmaker, but Tanahashi blocked the lariat, hit a German suplex and then a dragon suplex for near falls. He hit the sling blade followed by the high fly flow but Okada kicked out. Tanahashi went to work on Okada's legs with dragon screws and the Texas cloverleaf. Tanahashi bent him back like it was a Chris Jericho old style WCW lion tamer. Okada made the ropes and then stunned Tanahashi with a high dropkick as Tanahashi came off the ropes. Tanahashi ducked the rainmaker. Okada went for a dropkick as Tanahashi was coming off the ropes but missed when Tanahashi held up. Okada hit a dropkick to the back and used a tombstone piledriver on Tanahashi. He went for the rainmaker again, but Tanahashi reversed with a sling blade. Okada tried another tombstone piledriver, but Tanahashi blocked it. Okada landed lots of elbows but Tanahashi dropkicked the left knee that Tanahashi spent much of the match targeting. Tanahashi then hit a tombstone piledriver, a crossbody off the top and the high fly flow (frog splash) for the win. ****3/4

JANUARY 4, 2014

After a year in which the promotion will likely dominate the pro wrestling awards, New Japan Pro Wrestling, a 42-year-old company that increased revenues 45 percent over the past year, put on its biggest show and announced its most ambitious year since its comeback.

The promotion, which has struggled for years, has made a comeback on the back of a cast of veteran characters, and a few young ones, who all have their own unique role.

Hiroshi Tanahashi is the star, promoted as the best pro wrestler of the century, which as overplayed as that sounds, thus far may be a distinction he deserves. He's got the look, the charisma and the ability, and has been the key face who has brought the promotion to its new level as easily the No. 2 pro wrestling promotion in the world. But at 37, his back and knee problems mounting, the idea that he can be counted on for a match of the year contender at almost every PPV is dwindling.

Shinsuke Nakamura is his career rival. He's charismatic in a very different way, and has become an excellent worker. Through his work, the IWGP Intercontinental title has become a big show main event belt, something that will no doubt continue with Tanahashi's victory over him at the 1/4 Tokyo Dome show.

But the key going forward is Kazuchika Okada. It was only two years ago when Okada returned from a long period in TNA, where he was best known for wearing a Lone Ranger mask and being whipped by Pope D'Angelo Dinero in a backstage skit. Because of his height, look and athletic ability, the promotion chose him to be their breakout new star in 2012, and to beat Tanahashi to win the IWGP title in February of that year despite him not looking at all impressive in his Tokyo Dome return. Because of the quality of wrestlers he's in with, rarely do you see the glimpses of his weaknesses. He's green in some ways. He actually has limited natural charisma, but it's covered up well with elaborate ring entrances, poses, a series of

trademark spots, and a manager who does a great job talking for him. But he is an awesome talent, with arguably the best dropkick in the business. And after two years, he's got the credibility with the fans due to his two runs with a championship title belt that is booked to mean a lot. Every title match has a winner and a loser, and rarely is there controversy when it's over. Even if Tanahashi is the bigger star today, Okada is the future as the natural evolution comes along, where Tanahashi ends up in the position Yuji Nagata has held for the last several years, the former top worker in the company who can be counted on when needed to give you a great match.

Everything else is covered. Tetsuya Naito is struggling in the role of the new Tanahashi, but Togi Makabe is the house brawler, Nakamura, Minoru Suzuki and Katsuyori Shibata are the shooters, but different kinds. Nakamura blends a legit rep from being a college wrestling star and some MMA events in his youth to working strong style pro wrestling. Shibata works a ridiculously stiff brawling style. Suzuki works a more cerebral style based around timing and the appearance he's a badass, who is uncooperative and an asshole, but instead, those around him rave about his working ability. Kota Ibushi is the high flyer, the junior heavyweight star who is being booked to where he can compete with the heavyweights. And Hirooki Goto is the perennial bridesmaid. He's Ron Garvin in the days of Jim Crockett Promotions, in that he can, whenever asked, give you a great world title challenge, but if he ever gets the title, it's going to be as a career achievement award and is probably not going to be a good idea.

In many ways, the current New Japan hierarchy is reminiscent of a late 80s Jim Crockett Promotions, which is both a compliment, but not one, since that group grew its business greatly on the back of a great talent mix, went with a pat hand too long, and eventually fell into grave problems.

New Japan in the ring peaked at the G-1 Climax tournament with some of the greatest pro wrestling shows ever seen. But the toll was large. The guys in their 20s and early 30s seem to have survived it just fine, but the key guys on the roster, who are mid-30s to early-40s, paid a price that is still being paid today. But there is a time lag between ones physical peak and their drawing power peak.

In 2014, it's doubtful New Japan will be able to live up to the in-ring standard of 2013. It would be almost impossible. But it can grow as a business while preparing for its future.

Opening day was the sign of that in many ways. The 1/4 event, Wrestle Kingdom at the Tokyo Dome, headlined by Tanahashi's IC title win over Nakamura and Okada's successful IWGP title defense over Naito, drew 35,000 fans.

The spectacle was there. And by most normal standards, the show was very good. But the January 4, 2013, show was among the greatest wrestling events of all-time. A look at this year's lineup from the start indicated they wouldn't be able to match it. And while the crowd was bigger, they were a lot quieter. Nothing on this show got the crowd to the frenzied level that a number of last year's matches did. The first half of the show was not good, although both tag title matches were fine, and the Gracies match was kind of an atrocity.

The four key matches that looked on paper to be can't miss, all were, but in all four of the matches, the same performers had better matches against each other in the past. And the card, which began at 4:30 p.m. in Tokyo and ended at 10 p.m., was too long. It did hurt the heat in the key matches.

From a production standpoint, nobody since the heyday of Pride has done a show at this level. When it comes to things like ring entrances and match videos, it put WrestleMania to shame and made UFC 168 feel like nothing but a bunch of fights that were sent in the ring. There is far more WWE and UFC can learn about making a big show bigger than New Japan could learn from WWE and UFC.

In particular, both groups can learn from the long storytelling arcs in the videos building the main matches. With Goto vs. Shibata, they went back to 1995, when the two were best friends in high school, with photos of them as teenagers competing as amateurs, photos and clips of them breaking into pro wrestling, Shibata going into MMA, and their brutal feud of the past year. As a general rule, when two people have the kind of feud these two had, the idea of them making up and then becoming a tag team right away gets over like a UFC fighter after a grudge match telling people in the cage right after the completion of the match that the grudge was all about selling tickets. But in this case, after Goto won (a result I disagreed with but understood that since Shibata had won previously and Goto is the house fighter that the program would probably end this way), and they embraced, it was something the audience was led to, and the immediate reaction is you want the two as a tag team. And that's the next direction, although with Goto's win, he gets the next IWGP title match with Okada.

Okada vs. Naito showed clips from 2007, when Naito was a dark-haired prelim wrestler and the two were working undercard matches against each other.

The musical acts, in particular Marty Friedman, the former guitarist from Megadeth, were used far more effectively. Friedman, who has lived in Japan for years and is a celebrity there as a 90s worldwide rock icon who is now part of a well known Japanese band billed as the greatest guitarist in the world, played Tanahashi's theme while going to the ring with him before the match, as well as after the match. In a trivia note, Friedman played on "Born Of Anger" on Fozzy's "All That Remains" album.

UFC could and should copy the video package done before all the IWGP title matches, where they show head shots on the screen of every previous champion. It makes the title match seem so much bigger playing on the history of the names who have held it (and in some cases, tells the story of foolishness going on with some of the faces having held it). It takes less than a minute, but sets the mood for a title match perfectly.

The use of legends, in this case Harley Race and Stan Hansen, was also more effective. Race, who is usually confined to a wheelchair, was very unsteady on his feet and needed a cane, but still threw a short punch that heel manager Bruce Tharpe oversold to get an easy pop. It wasn't the best thing physically, but it was Harley Race before an NWA title match. Everyone knows this NWA title means nothing in comparison to the NWA title of the past, but having Race there

added something to when Satoshi Kojima won it. And more, you simply can't fake the look on Kojima's face after the match when he posed with Race holding the belt.

Hansen came out to a giant pop right before the main event. He wasn't there for comedy, or for older fans to see their legends abused as a measure to get heat. Many of the fans remember Hansen as the top foreign superstar in Japan of their childhood, and nothing was done to tarnish that thought. He was there and sat at ringside while Tanahashi and Nakamura did their thing in the main event.

Besides Tanahashi's IC title win over Nakamura and Kojima's NWA title win over Rob Conway, there were three other title changes on the Dome show. Kota Ibushi won the IWGP jr. title from Prince Devitt, and Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows (Doc in TNA/Luke Gallows in WWE) won the IWGP tag team titles from the Killer Elite Squad, Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr.

Devitt was really sick with the flu the day before, shaking and throwing up. He was feeling a little better the day of the show, but not himself, and people were really impressed he went out there and had the match he did, as one of four straight ***** or better matches that closed out the show.

Perhaps the biggest news came after the sixth match, when a video was played about New Japan's 2014 schedule.

They announced two big shows for next month, a 2/9 date at the Hiroshima Sun Plaza Arena and 2/11 at the Bodymaker Colosseum in Osaka, both called "The New Beginning."

The latter will be the next PPV show in Japan. What's notable is they've split the title matches up on the two shows. What happened in 2013 is they had such loaded lineups (like really what happens at WrestleMania every year), that all but the biggest matches would get shortchanged on time. Spread over two shows, matches that would be early in a loaded show are closer to main events, and thus will be more focused parts of the show and have more time. The negative is the PPV itself isn't quite as loaded. As far as the effect on the U.S. market, that's so minuscule for the promotion that it doesn't matter. But they are right now scheduled for two iPPV shows in three days, one on a Sunday morning, and the bigger one on a Tuesday morning.

The 2/9 show has Kota Ibushi & Bushi vs. El Desperado (Kyosuke Mikami, who was Namajague in CMLL the past few years and has been brought back with a push) & Jushin Liger, Suzuki vs. Tama Tonga, Nagata & Kazushi Sakuraba vs. Toru Yano & Takashi Iizuka, Hiroyoshi Tenzan vs. Michael Tarver, Kojima vs. Big Daddy Yum Yum (Byron Wilcott of the NWA group in Texas) for the NWA title, Naito & Tomoaki Honma vs. Tomohiro Ishii & Yujiro Takahashi, Makabe & Ryusuke Taguchi (who will return after eight months out due to injuries on the 2/2 Korakuen Hall show) & Alex Shelley & Kushida vs. Young Bucks & Devitt & Bad Luck Fale, Goto & Shibata vs. Okada & Yoshi-Hashi, Anderson & Gallows vs. Archer & Smith Jr. for the IWGP tag team titles and Tanahashi vs. Nakamura for the IC title.

The 2/11 show has Young Bucks vs. Shelley & Kushida for the IWGP jr. tag titles, Shibata vs. Yoshi-Hashi, Suzuki & Archer & Smith Jr. vs. Anderson & Gallows & Tonga, Tenzan & Kojima vs. Yum Yum & Tarver (winners get a shot at NWA tag champs Rob Conway & Jax Dane),

Nagata & Sakuraba vs. Daniel & Rolles Gracie, Tanahashi & Liger vs. Nakamura & Yujiro Takahashi, Ibushi vs. Desperado for the IWGP jr. title, Naito vs. Ishii for the Never title (the action was really hot between the two of them on 1/5 at Korakuen Hall) and Okada vs. Goto for the IWGP heavyweight title.

The March PPV show looks to be on 3/6 at Ota Ward Gym in Tokyo (the site where the promotion ran its first show ever on March 4, 1972, headlined by Antonio Inoki vs. Karl Gotch), which is being called the Raising An Army Anniversary.

The Big Japan Cup (single elimination tournament for an IWGP title shot at the Invasion Attack PPV) will be from 3/15 at Korakuen Hall to 3/23 with the finals being an afternoon show in Amagasaki.

Invasion Attack this year is 4/6 at Sumo Hall in Tokyo.

They also announced dates on 4/12 and 4/13 called Wrestling World, in Taiwan.

The annual Wrestling Dontaku show is again on 5/3 at the Fukuoka International Center Arena. It will be one of two major shows that month, as they also have "Back to the Yokohama Arena," which will be one of the year's biggest events, on 5/25.

They announced that the Best of the Super Junior finals will be 6/8 at the second Yoyogi Gym in Tokyo, which holds about 3,800, as opposed to Korakuen Hall.

The Dominion PPV will be 6/21 in Osaka at the Bodymaker Colosseum.

They also announced that the G-1 Climax tournament will be from 7/21, opening in Osaka, with the finals on 8/10. That's about twice as long as last year. There is talk of having more than two blocks, with an idea talked about being four blocks, meaning that instead of nine (or ten for the finalists) hard singles matches in 11 days, it'll be spread over 21 days and maybe cut back to five or six matches for all but the final four. But the big news was that for the first time in the history of the tournament that dates back to 1991, the finals are being moved from Sumo Hall in Tokyo to the Seibu Dome in Tokorozawa.

The Seibu Dome, home of the Seibu Lions baseball team, holds 33,921 for baseball. It's only 19 miles from Tokyo, but with traffic, it's more than an hour drive from downtown. No pro wrestling event has ever been held at the Seibu Dome. Pride ran the building once, on August 27, 2000, and sold out with 32,919, for the show headlined by Sakuraba vs. Renzo Gracie, Ryan Gracie vs. Tokimitsu Ishizawa (Kendo Ka Shin), Ken Shamrock vs. Kazuyuki Fujita and Guy Mezger vs. Wanderlei Silva.

A 3-D version of the Tokyo Dome show will play in movie theaters in Japan from 2/22 to 3/7.

1. Tomoaki Honma & Bushi & Captain New Japan & Hiroyoshi Tenzan beat Yohei Komatsu & Jushin Liger & Super Strong Machine & Manabu Nakanishi in 8:11. Liger and Machine are the only two men on the first-ever pro wrestling show at the Tokyo Dome in 1989 and this show. Tiger Mask was taken ill and replaced by Komatsu, who it was said won a wrestle-off with Sho Tanaka to get the spot on the card. Match wasn't very good. Komatsu was the heart of the

match, selling and coming back and getting near falls on Tenzan. Nakanishi was so slow out there. The finish saw Captain give Komatsu the Caribbean death grip, followed by Honma using a diving head-butt off the top rope on him, and then Tenzan did a diving head-butt on him and finished him with a Boston crab submission. *1/2

2. The Young Bucks, Matt & Nick Jackson, retained the IWGP jr. tag titles in a four-way over The Time Splitters (Alex Shelley & Kushida), The Forever Hooligans (Rocky Romero & Alex Koslov) and Taka Michinoku & Taichi in 10:35. The Time Splitters came out in a DeLorean “Back to the Future” car. Michinoku & Taichi came out surrounded by schoolgirls. Koslov wanted to sing the Russian national anthem. Everyone stood up in the crowd. Just as he started, the Bucks gave Koslov a double superkick from behind and we were off. Shelley & Kushida did cool double-team moves. Early, Michinoku & Taichi went to ringside and sat at the announcers table doing commentary, which I thought came across silly in a title match. It made the belts look like they meant nothing. The teams did all of their usual stuff. There was a spot where the Bucks & Michinoku & Taichi did a four-man suplex on Shelley & Kushida & Romero & Koslov. Romero did a tope on Nick Jackson. Matt Jackson did a sliding kick on Romero. Koslov suplexed Nick over the top and both went over. Michinoku did an Asai moonsault on everyone. Shelley & Kushida followed with a simultaneous running flip dive over the top. The Bucks did a double-team superplex spot on Taichi onto everyone waiting on the floor to catch them. It’s amazing the first time you see it. But it’s not a spot you should do in every big match. With so many people having to be there to catch them because of the danger, it looks too set up for my taste. They teased all eight would be counted out, but at 19, all eight jumped into the ring together. Again, too much of a choreographed feel. They went to several minutes of near falls. The Bucks did a stuff tombstone piledriver on Taichi but Taka saved. They did a double superplex on Michinoku. Then Nick did a 450 on Taichi, and Matt did a moonsault (More bang for your buck) and Matt pinned Taichi to retain. ***1/4

Current notes: The first Tokyo Dome show featuring the Young Bucks, and it’s very possible this week’s could be the last.

3. Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows beat Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr. to win IWGP tag titles in 10:27. Anderson & Gallows came out dressed up like military snipers in camo and face paint, acting like they were Kevin Nash & Scott Hall. Anderson as one of the lines in his promos claims that he’s so cool that Scott Hall follows him on twitter. Gallows was carrying a giant bazooka that he shot off. Archer & Smith Jr. came out riding motorcycles down the ramp. Tonga was interfering early. Smith Jr. & Archer set up the Killer bomb on him but Gallows & Anderson saved him. They worked over Smith, including a senton by Anderson and splash by Gallows for a near fall. Anderson’s gunstun attempt was turned into a Saito suplex by Smith. Archer tagged in and they pushed the idea of Archer vs. Gallows as these two giants going at it. Archer did Undertaker’s old school rope walk when Tonga shoved him and Archer crotchted himself on the top rope. Archer later did his finisher, the blackout, on Anderson, but Tonga pulled ref Massao Hattori out of the ring before he could count three. Smith attacked Tonga and they laid him out with a Killer bomb. Attempts at Killer bombs by KES and Magic Killers by The Bullet club were blocked. Archer did a high choke slam on Anderson for a near fall. He tried a second choke

slam, but Anderson turned it into a gun stun, but Smith broke up the pin. Gallows gave Smith a flapjack. Archer went for another choke slam on Anderson, but Gallows chopped him to the throat and Anderson & Gallows used the Magic killer on Archer for the pin. ***

4. Satoshi Kojima pinned Rob Conway in 8:27 to win the NWA heavyweight title. Tenzan came out with Kojima. Jax Dane came out with Conway. Harley Race was very unsteady on his feet, but decked Bruce Tharpe with a short left. It was then weird to have them both sitting at the same table during the match. Kojima is really hurting. He no longer even does his trademark elbow off the top rope. He went to do it and Dane distracted him, which allowed Conway a chance to recover and give him a Flair style slam off the top. Conway used a Mongolian chop right in front of Tenzan, which got the crowd mad. Tenzan got into a terrible looking brawl with Dane. Tenzan laid him out with a Mountain bomb. Conway hit a spear on Kojima and went for the Ego trip, but Kojima turned it into a Koji cutter. The finish saw Kojima duck a Conway lariat, and then hit him with a lariat for the pin. Tharpe's temper tantrum after his guy lost the NWA title was awesome. The crowd did pop for the title change. **

Current note: The NWA title returns to the Tokyo Dome for the first time in more than two decades.

5. Yuji Nagata & Kazushi Sakuraba beat Rolles & Daniel Gracie via DQ in 9:50. This stuff either works or it doesn't and in this case, it didn't. Sakuraba & Nagata came out with a bunch of kids all wearing Strong Machine masks doing the old Gracie train and Nagata salute. Nagata also came out wearing a Machine mask. The Gracies came out with Jiu Jitsu students. You knew things were bad when Rolles got a triangle on Sakuraba and he got out, and nobody cared. This may not have worked today under any circumstances, but this is the kind of match that the Tokyo Dome big show concept was built around, the New Japan vs. outsiders from another promotion or sport. The problem is fans know enough to know Rolles and Daniel are Gracies by ring name (Daniel's real name is Daniel Simoes, a cousin of Renzo Gracie), but you can't just put a guy in a gi and call him a Gracie today and have anyone care like it was 15 years ago. Apparently New Japan's idea was to start this feud here and build it to bringing in Rickson, but I just can't see Rickson doing pro wrestling against Sakuraba. I do think if it was Rickson & Royce that this would have worked. Another problem is the match was choreographed, as it should have been just a semi-shoot, just nobody trying to finish, so it would have a real look instead of a really fake look since the Gracies can't work. Plus they forgot some spots. Nagata got the crowd woken up with some low kicks and slaps. The ref got mad when Rolles was punching from the mount. Sakuraba had one good flurry of punches and Sakuraba got mount and was throwing Mongolian chops (from the match with Royce at the Tokyo Dome in 2000). Nagata used a back suplex on Daniel for a near fall and the Nagata armlock, but Daniel made the ropes. Daniel blocked his second back suplex, used a judo throw on Nagata and started choking him with his gi, which is illegal in pro wrestling so the ref called for a DQ when he refused to break after warnings. Nagata sold it like he was choked out. The crowd didn't like the match and hated the finish. Worse, the finish meant we're getting a rematch next month. The crowd was booing the finish, and booed Rolles when he wanted a rematch. Then, as apropos, Sakuraba tried to accept but the mic didn't work, and finally Nagata accepted the rematch.^{5*}

6. Great Muta & Toru Yano beat Minoru Suzuki & Shelton Benjamin in 12:04. I'll say this much for Muta. His ring outfit was super cool, especially the mask he worked in, and he was in great physical shape for his age (he's now 51) and had a great tan. But his knees have been shot since 1990 and he's destined by wind up in really bad shape because even now it looks like he struggles to just walk down the aisle. He's all wrong for an opponent of Benjamin in particular. This was the first show where Suzuki kicking the kid who opens the ropes for him on the final bars of Kaze Ni Nare just seemed tired. Some brawling and chair shots, and the usual in a Yano match of uncovering the turnbuckle and guys going into the metal. The whole story here is Suzuki is a million times better than Yano, but he so badly wants to kill him and always gets outsmarted. Muta hit Suzuki with the shining wizard, used the dragon screw on Benjamin and Taka Michinoku, the shining wizard on Michinoku and then spit the green mist at Taichi, who was interfering. The finish saw Suzuki have Yano in the choke when Muta came in. The ref was distracted and Yano gave Suzuki a backwards Ric Flair low blow kick and then Muta sprayed green mist in Suzuki's eyes and Yano pinned Suzuki again with his with an outside cradle. *1/4

7. Togi Makabe beat Bad Luck Fale in 15:05 in the King of Destroyer match. Basically this was a death match which could only be won via knockout or submission. In a long singles match you could really see how green Fale is, but Makabe carried him well. Fale was choking and dragging Makabe around outside the ring with a chain. Makabe came back with punches and a clothesline and hit the Death Valley bomb. He went to the top rope for the King Kong kneedrop, but Fale moved. Fale came back and his the grenade (thumb to the side of the throat) but Makabe got up at eight. Then in the big spot, Fale hit the border toss, which he's used to knock people out cold and guys were all going out on stretchers for him to build this match. Makabe just barely got up at nine, but the pop after all the building for the spot wasn't what it should have been. It's usually Fale's walk-off knockout spot. Fale went to the top, and was unsteady on the top and missed a splash off the top. Makabe came back including being outside the ring and power bombing Fale through a thick table. Fale's head and neck were too far out so it was his lower back going through the table and head and neck hitting the floor. Makabe was killing him with clotheslines in the corner. Fale got up at nine. Makabe then used a King Kong kneedrop off the top to the back of the head, and a second King Kong kneedrop to the throat. Makabe collapsed from his prior beating. So both were down. Makabe struggled to beat the ten count, but Fale didn't move at all, and was convincingly beaten. That aspect was good in that you had a clear winner and loser. **

8. Hirooki Goto pinned Katsuyori Shibata in 15:33. This was Goto's first match back since suffering a broken jaw in the G-1 tournament, which is one of the reasons Shibata should have gone over and been the one challenging for the title. This was the first match the live crowd was into like it was something big. The story early is Shibata was slapping him and decked him with a right, with the idea he was testing if Goto's jaw would hold up. The storytelling here from start-to-finish was great. The only negative is thus couldn't even come close to their June match. Super stiff forearms to the jaw by Shibata and a running dropkick into the corner to the face. Goto sold like his jaw may have been broken again. Shibata continued to work on him until Goto killed him with a lariat and landed hard kicks and clotheslines. They traded elbows and it

looked like Shibata was getting the better of it until running into a hard clothesline. They did no sell spots back and forth where Shibata wouldn't go down from clotheslines and Goto wouldn't go down from kicks to the face. Shibata went for another kick, but Goto caught the foot, and while Shibata was off balance, clotheslined him for a near fall. Shibata used a figure four and abdominal stretch, as well as a German suplex. They traded back suplexes back and forth. Then Goto hit a lariat and Shibata kicked out strong at one. Shibata kicked Goto in the face and he kicked out strong at one. Goto then used his best friend's finisher, the penalty kick (running kick to the chest while the guy is on his knees) but Shibata kicked out. Goto then kicked out of the penalty kick and Shibata kicked out of the shoten kai. Shibata used a shoten kai and Goto kicked out. Shibata picked Goto up for the GTS (story is he learned this from KENTA, who invented the move) but Goto used elbow after elbow to get out. Both used head-butts and they teased a double knockout (two of their bouts ended that way). Shibata got up at six, beat down Goto and went for the penalty kick but got clotheslined but Shibata kicked out at one. Goto used a lariat to the front, another to the back, and another to the front, but Shibata stayed up. Then Goto killed him with a fourth lariat and hit the shoten kai (Matt Morgan's Hellevator finish in TNA) for the pin. When it was over, both men embraced and both were crying, with the idea that in trying to kill each other and ending their feud, they remembered back to the video where they were best friends in high school learning wrestling. Even though Goto won, he sold it like he took more of a beating, and it was Shibata who helped him to the back, and they left arm in arm. The whole thing from opening video to both leaving together to the match was really super if you've followed their feud. Great beginning, middle, ending and when the match was over, it was done and you understood why. In that sense, from a depth standpoint, this was one of the best feuds in years. ****

9. Kota Ibushi pinned Prince Devitt in 16:22 to win the IWGP jr. title. Ibushi was working here with broken fingers in his left hand and Devitt was really sick, and he's still got a jacked up elbow, so this, while a great match, wasn't one of the off-the-charts kind of matches they've had many times in the past. A bunch of pall bearers came out carrying a coffin, opened it up, and Devitt came out all painted up to look like Giant Gonzalez in the 90s. Actually he was trying to look like Carnage from Marvel Comics. Lots of Bullet Club interference, as Anderson, Gallows, Tonga and the Young Bucks were out. No sign of Fale as he had to sell the beating from being knocked out. They were beating on Ibushi. He was hung upside down in the corner and Anderson and Matt Jackson were choking him. The ref wouldn't count as Devitt went for the pin. Anderson gave Ibushi a sick power bomb to the side of the ring. Devitt missed a double foot stomp and Ibushi dropkicked him, and then did a backward dropkick onto both Young Bucks and a top rope Asai moonsault onto the entire Bullet Club on the floor. Ibushi used a springboard dropkick, quick strikes, a standing shooting star press followed by a middle rope moonsault for near fall. Ibushi went for a rolling reverse cradle, but Devitt kicked him off into a chair shot by Anderson. Devitt got a near fall with a schoolboy. Ibushi got a near fall with a German suplex. After more Bullet Club shenanigans, the ref kicked them all out. The match got great from that point. Devitt put Ibushi in a chair on the floor near the guard rail and did a running dropkick nearly knocking Ibushi over the barricade. Devitt did a double foot stomp to the back of Ibushi's head for a near fall and a high dropkick. They traded more near falls

including a great double foot stomp off the top by Devitt for a near fall. Ibushi landed all kinds of kicks, a fast German suplex, a sit out power bomb and finally got the pin with the Phoenix splash. After the match, El Desperado came out with black roses and a guitar case. He left without opening the guitar case. ****

10. Kazuchika Okada pinned Tetsuya Naito in 30:58 to retain the IWGP heavyweight title. They started slow so you could see they were going to be out there for a while. Some nice Lucha. They were outside the ring and Okada did a windsprint down the ramp into a low dropkick. Okada tried a tombstone piledriver on the floor, but Naito instead kicked off the apron and hit a tornado DDT dropping Okada on his head on the ramp. Naito went for the Pluma blanca and crickets chirped. I swear at the 28:00 mark at the Korakuen Hall show on 12/23, Okada should have submitted to that move. It would made that a strong match of the year candidate and helped this match a lot. At one point Naito hit him with like 15 head-butts in a row. Okada put Naito on the top rope and did his high dropkick to the floor. Naito's left knee (the good one) got hooked on the ropes when going over. He acted like he was hurt. Okada did a draping DDT off the apron to the floor on top of Naito's head. After a missed dropkick, Naito went to the pluma blanca but Okada made the ropes. Enzuigiri and German suplex by Naito. Naito charged but Okada laid him out with a flapjack. Okada came back with a DDT and red ink (STF camel clutch) and held it for a long time before Naito made the ropes. Okada blocked a tombstone, hit a flying forearm and Frankensteiner off the top, and then a dragon suplex for a near fall. He missed a stardust press and Okada came back with a fireman's carry into a neckbreaker, then heavy rain (fireman's carry into a suplex). Okada went for the rainmaker but Naito turned it into a front rolling cradle for a near fall, then used a uranage. They went back and forth. Okada went for the rainmaker but Naito slapped him in the face. Okada hit a high dropkick. Each started blocking the others' finish. Okada hit a tombstone piledriver and went for the rainmaker, but Okada blocked. Okada blocked the headlock take over into a pluma blanca, Okada hit a second tombstone piledriver and then the rainmaker and got the three count.

****1/4

Notes: This was the match that led to the current Naito. The fans rejected him as a the G-1 winner as a babyface. The reaction was so bad that New Japan had a fan vote for the main event spot, which Tanahashi vs. Nakamura—the IC title mach, won easily. It led to the multi-year story that is still going on, of Naito winning the main event and the IWGP title at the Tokyo Dome.

11. Hiroshi Tanahashi pinned Shinsuke Nakamura to win the IC title in 23:24. Stan Hansen came out first. It appeared the crowd was going crazy, but since New Japan doesn't have the rights to Hansen's famous music, we got no sound, only saw Hansen in the ring tearing up. We did get to see Marty Freidman rock the guitar in the best ring entrance since Suzuki's last year. Then Nakamura came out with a bunch of poles set up with pole dancers. That was different. This would not be seen in WWE as those women were showing some incredible core strength the way they kept themselves on those poles. It was well over five hours into the show, past 11:30 p.m., when this started and they were following a great match. This was an excellently worked match but like the prior match, it never got the crowd going like a match of the year for

a number of reasons. Tanahashi worked over the knees with dragon screws. Nakamura came back and whipped Tanahashi chest first into the guard rail and delivered a running knee to the back of the head. Hard running knee by Nakamura. Tanahashi was draped over the apron and Nakamura was on the apron to deliver a kneedrop. Tanahashi moved and Nakamura missed, flew off the apron with knee hitting the mats on the floor. Tanahashi did his big plancha spot. They teased a double count out but nobody for a second thought they were ending it that early nor that they'd end a Dome show that way. Nakamura out of nowhere got a triangle, but Tanahashi reversed into a Texas cloverleaf. Nakamura made the rope. Tanahashi kept going for German suplexes, actually he tried a dragon suplex but Nakamura blocked with an elbow. Then he tried a cross arm German suplex but Nakamura head-butted backwards. Then he hit a German suplex. A great spot where Nakamura threw Tanahashi over the top, but he skinned the cat back in but Nakamura met him with a back stabber for a near fall. They traded elbows until Nakamura got the edge. Nakamura started with the stomps and soccer kicks from the Pride days. He did a bomb a ye to the back of the head, a backbreaker and a reverse powerslam. He put Tanahashi on his shoulders, but from that position, Tanahashi wriggled out and hit the sling blade (necktie clothesline). Tanahashi back with a dragon suplex and high fly flow. Nakamura kicked out. Nobody kicks out of the high fly flow. Nakamura did a bomb a ye off the middle rope and a second bomb a ye, but Tanahashi kicked out. Both were landing haymaker punches. Tanahashi used a dragon screw and put on the Texas cloverleaf, but Nakamura made the ropes. The finish saw Tanahashi change from a Texas cloverleaf into the Styles clash, then hit a crossbody off the top and finally the high fly flow for the pin. Tanahashi did his post match air guitar celebration but then collapsed. Marty Friedman came back out and played Tanahashi's theme while the crowd celebrated. No post-show challenges were issued. They saved that for the next night. ****1/4

JANUARY 4, 2015

There were all sorts of issues, some expected, others not so much, involved in bringing a live major New Japan show onto U.S. PPV.

There is the time difference, since the shows air in the middle of the night U.S. time. There is the time frame, as New Japan's big shows usually end up going around four-and-a-half hours. And there is the language barrier, announcing issues and cultural differences.

Wrestle Kingdom 9, from a U.S. perspective, was a show that will show if it is possible to garner enough PPV buys to be successful with no television backing, and largely promoted around an announcer.

From a Japan perspective, it is their biggest show of the year, the 24th straight year that 1/4 means New Japan at the Tokyo Dome. During that period New Japan has gone from feast, regularly packing the building, often selling it out, to famine, periods where they literally couldn't even give tickets away the image of the company was so bad and they seemed on the rocks.

While people like to say this is a boom period, and New Japan's business in 2014 was up 256

percent from 2011, it is still nowhere close to what it was in the 80s and 90s. And it probably will never be, because cultures change and the place pro wrestling has in Japanese culture simply can't be what it was. With the only national broadcast television being on at around 3 a.m. (Even the Dome special aired after 1 a.m. that night on TV-Asahi), it's very difficult to make new fans. Still, it's a young audience and some of the top stars like Hiroshi Tanahashi, Shinsuke Nakamura, Kazuchika Okada and Togi Makabe have a level of mainstream fame and name recognition, but you don't have Antonio Inoki or even Riki Choshu level mainstream superstars.

As far as the show went, it could possibly win show of the year. If it doesn't, then there is something major to look forward to. The Tanahashi win over Okada would have been a strong match of the year candidate, except it has almost no chance given the Nakamura vs. Kota Ibushi match that preceded it. I don't know if there has ever been a big wrestling show with a match as good as Makabe vs. Tomohiro Ishii, that got almost no votes for best match.

With them rushing several of the matches and eliminating intermission, the two big matches had ample time, and they actually rushed so much that they ended early. It reminded me of the When World's Collide show from AAA in 1994, in the sense it was the first time much of the audience saw a live major show from a hot promotion on live PPV. Before When World's Collide, there was a lot of panic over the fact AAA rarely got their shows done in less than four hours, and often didn't start on time. As it turned out, the panic over the time, having matches go short, led to the show being over in barely two hours. But it was viewed by many at the time as the greatest pro wrestling PPV ever, and would still rank near the top today.

This show was much better.

But the question was how much of a success will it be? Among Observer readers, as you can tell by the response volume, it was a huge success. But that's not indicative of anything, because a major percentage of New Japan's iPPV buys in the U.S. and U.K. came from Observer readers, and those numbers outside Japan topped out in the past at about 1,500.

Jeff Jarrett, who promoted the event through his Global Force Wrestling company, did everything possible that could be done to publicize a show with little money for advertising and no television. Kevin Sullivan produced video after video, featuring the competitors, and mostly pushing Ross, who teased that it could be his last show, and that the main event could be the greatest match he ever calls.

He ended up getting no help from the cable and satellite providers, even though he described them as enthusiastic about the product, given that they were way down in event PPV revenue this year with the huge decline in UFC, a somewhat weak year for boxing, and WWE PPV business nosediving with the launch of the network. The idea is they were more open to new product, such as Ring of Honor and New Japan.

But, I never saw one commercial on television for the show, and I watch a lot of the related sports programming cable companies should be advertising it on, all the pro wrestling shows and the UFC shows. Coming on the same night as UFC 182 had its ups and downs. For some, it

was the idea of this great festival of watching the biggest UFC show in more than a year and one of its biggest grudge matches ever, and following it with New Japan. But it was of no benefit for the show to start one hour after the completion of UFC. Plus, with a big UFC show the same weekend, no system that puts commercials for its PPV events was going to give inventory to an unproven product over a sure-fire hit. Still, I at least saw "rotation" commercials for TNA shows when they were on PPV, and saw nothing of the sort here.

Most cable systems opted out of carrying it live, figuring the replay of a major UFC show is going to do far more business than an unproven commodity from Japan. It was difficult to order. DirecTV had it, but you couldn't push a button to order it. I was able to call a few days ahead to order, but many noted to us the day of the show that if you called to order that they told you that you couldn't even order after 10 p.m.

Most, if they wanted to see it live, had to either order it via New Japan World, which was inexpensive, but the commentary was in Japanese, which limits you to a small percentage of potential viewers, or through the Flipp's app. It was almost impossible to order it there ahead of time as you couldn't even find it. Then, on the day of the show, they got so many orders, the most they had ever gotten for any event, that it crashed for a long period of time, although it did eventually work. Many got refunds, and others saw parts of the show but had to wait until it was over to see the replay.

The expectation was that most of the viewing would not be live, but in the traditional Sunday wrestling PPV time slot, but moved up an hour. But DirecTV didn't air at that time, and wasn't going to give it a replay airing until 1/8.

The point being is that people who wanted to see it had to go out of their way to see it. There was no exposure mainstream enough that would have hit anything but the hardcore wrestling fan audience. And whatever the number of buys ends up being both on the Flipp's app (which beat the number of any ROH iPPV to date even with the foul-ups and difficulties in ordering) and regular PPV, it is far under what the show would have done if it had the two time slots universally everywhere and, to a lesser extent, if the cable and satellite providers didn't make it difficult to order. But I know of a lot of people who wanted to get the English language version and because of all the problems, between systems not carrying it live and the Flipp's app issues, opted to watch it on New Japan World.

With hardcore fans, the show was a huge hit. Exactly how large that population is and if anyone outside that world is receptive to a new product will be determined when the numbers come in.

If it is a success, there will be more. Perhaps the next show will be the Invasion Attack event on 4/15 at Sumo Hall in Tokyo. The talk going on in Japan over the weekend is that if the show is a success that April would be the time to do a second one. The other major shows that were announced on the PPV were Dominion on 7/5 from the Osaka Jo Hall and the G-1 tournament finals, which will be 8/16, also at Sumo Hall, moved back to its historical finals location after only drawing 18,000 fans to the Seibu Dome last year.

Jarrett was also, if this show is a success, to work toward finalizing a deal with AAA to do

TripleMania this year on U.S. PPV. Ross is likely to be used as lead announcer, which will be far more of a challenge than this show was.

There were three title changes, as Makabe beat Ishii to win the Never Open Weight title in a typical brutal Ishii match, Kenny Omega debuted as a New Japan full-timer by beating Ryusuke Taguchi to win the IWGP jr. title and Katsuyori Shibata & Hirooki Goto, the buddies from high school who started their careers together, ended the exactly one year reign of Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows as IWGP tag team champions.

No big angles were shot on the show, but the next night, for the “Raw after WrestleMania” show at Korakuen Hall, called New Year’s Dash, both Okada and Tanahashi were selling the brutality of their match the night before, and each lost in a tag situation. First, Bad Luck Fale & Tama Tonga beat Okada & Toru Yano, when Fale pinned Okada after the Bad Luck Fall.

Tanahashi was pinned in the main event, an eight-man tag where The Bullet Club of A.J. Styles & Anderson & Gallows & Yujiro Takahashi beat Tanahashi & Goto & Shibata & Tetsuya Naito when Styles pinned Tanahashi after a Styles clash. Styles then cut a promo vowing to win the IWGP title.

Also expected is more trading of talent with Pro Wrestling NOAH. As noted before, New Japan either has secretly purchased controlling interest in NOAH to keep the struggling company alive, or is at least heavily funding them at this point. GHC champion Naomichi Marufuji and 2013 tag team of the year Mikey Nicholls & Shane Haste worked the Dome show. While they didn’t have the time to really get it over, they worked with New Japan’s Killer Elite Squad (Davey Boy Smith Jr. & Lance Archer) and that seems like a natural program in NOAH for 2015 as plans are for Smith Jr. & Archer to be regulars there. To help strengthen NOAH, the plans look to be that Suzuki-gun (Smith Jr. Archer, Minoru Suzuki, Taka Michinoku, Taichi and Desperado) will be invading NOAH. Suzuki’s win at the Dome over Kazushi Sakuraba may lead to him in the GHC title picture shortly, and back for another main event singles run.

Plans for New Japan’s major shows through August were announced in some detail during the broadcast.

The big matches in February, as noted, are spilt into two major shows.

The big show of the month will be a Wednesday show on 2/11 (Tuesday night at midnight Pacific time; 3 a.m. Wednesday morning on the East Coast), New Beginning in Osaka, with four title matches announced. Tanahashi defends the IWGP heavyweight title against A.J. Styles (I strongly suspect the title changes here, and that Okada or Nakamura get it from Styles with the idea that they are champion but never beat Tanahashi for it), plus rematches with Goto & Shibata defending the IWGP tag team titles against Anderson & Gallows, Omega defending the IWGP jr. title against Taguchi and Bobby Fish & Kyle O’Reilly defending the IWGP jr. tag titles in a three-way against Alex Shelley & Kushida (who I expect to win) and The Young Bucks.

The fourth team from the Dome, Rocky Romero & Alex Koslov, The Forever Hooligans, may be no more in New Japan. Apparently Koslov isn’t going to be retained, and he was saying goodbye to people at the 1/5 show.

The other big show is New Beginning in Sendai, on 2/14 for the Valentine's Day show on a Saturday morning (4 a.m. Eastern, 1 a.m. Pacific) from the Sun Plaza Hall, with four title matches headlined by Nakamura vs. Yuji Nagata for the IC title, Makabe vs. Ishii for the Never title, Rob Conway vs. Hiroyoshi Tenzan for the NWA title, and Jushin Liger vs. Chase Owens for the NWA jr .title. The Conway vs. Tenzan match was originally set for the Tokyo Dome, but moved to this show due to the time constraints.

Okada vs. Fale will likely be on one of those shows.

In March, they will have the annual New Japan Cup tournament, which is a single elimination tournament with the winner likely challenging for the IWGP title on 4/15, at the Invasion Attack show at Sumo Hall.

The New Japan Cup opens with the 43rd anniversary show on 3/5 at the Ota Ward Gym in Tokyo, and the finals will be 3/15 in Hiroshima at the Sun Plaza Arena.

Besides Invasion attack, they announced a big show for 4/29 in Kumamoto at the Gran Messe. The annual Wrestling Dontaku show is 5/3 at the Fukuoka International Center Arena.

Also in May will be joint shows in North America with Ring of Honor. The only two dates solidified are an iPPV show on 5/15 from the Ted Reeve Arena in Toronto, and a television taping on 5/16 in the same building. They are trying to put together shows for New York and Chicago as well, but they are not finalized.

There is a lot up in the air regarding the New Japan and ROH shows. Toronto is a lock. Originally the plans were to bring in eight or more New Japan wrestlers like last year, but there is uneasiness on the ROH side about the financials. As much as last year's two shows were a big critical success for ROH, and helped build hardcore buzz around the product, the shows were barely break even and there is a lot of bottom line pressure on ROH right now. The idea of trying to make more money by having the Toronto show be a PPV, but ROH has a June PPV date booked for Best in the World and they don't want to do two PPVs so close, and want to establish a tradition of having PPVs at certain times each year. New Japan is hoping for the same deal as last year, which would include holding a seminar and tryout at the ROH school. There was an idea for ROH vs. New Japan super shows in New York and Chicago, but if they cut back on New Japan talent, it won't be enough guys to make the theme work. There had been some unhappiness in ROH over New Japan cutting a deal with Jeff Jarrett for the Dome PPV, since there were those in ROH who had thought about the idea of a similar deal, but had never presented it to New Japan. Still, they thought they were the company New Japan was working with in the U.S.

The announcers did put ROH over a few times on the show, mentioning that Fish & O'Reilly were both the ROH tag team champions and the IWGP jr. tag team champions, which should make them the best tag team in the world at their weight. There were other favorable mentions of ROH during the show, more by Striker, who even mentioned PWG and Lucha Underground during the broadcast.

The Dominion PPV will be 7/5 from Osaka Jo Hall, which will be the biggest straight card (not including G-1) of the next eight months.

The G-1 Climax tournament opens 7/20 in Sapporo at the Sports Center. It will be the same as last year, spread out over three weeks, to allow guys time to heal up after their matches. Most of the tour will be matches every other day.

However, they are doing three straight major shows at the end, with Sumo Hall booked for the biggest shows of the tour on 8/14, 8/15 and 8/16 for the finals. The finals will likely sell out well in advance.

Wrestle Kingdom 9 drew 36,000 fans to the Tokyo Dome, which was a paid number. It will most likely be the second biggest crowd for pro wrestling in the world this year. It's also the biggest for New Japan's annual 1/4 show in at least 13 years. A Nagata vs. Jun Akiyama interpromotional main event in 2002 drew a sellout. There were two shows since then which had 40,000 or more in the building, but this show had more actual tickets sold as they were no significant papering.

To me, it's still a slight disappointment. Advance sales were far ahead of last year, up 50% as of a few weeks ago. But the final tally was almost identical to last year's 35,000. In many ways, while the product is hot by modern standards of pro wrestling, it's feels hotter when you watch the shows than it really is. It's more that New Japan is a promotion that has its really fervent fans what attend the big shows, but rank and file shows are really not much bigger than a strong U.S. indie group, and it's not mainstream. They present a great product, from the in-ring to the booking, and business is growing, but the lack of mainstream exposure gives them a certain ceiling.

To finish on time, besides scrapping the intermission, they also scrapped the elaborate ring entrances. Everyone was rushed into the ring. Many were rushed in the ring. Some wrestlers in prelims were essentially told one big spot and that's it. As far as the big WrestleMania event feel, it did not have it compared to shows in recent years. For Americans watching for the first time, it wouldn't make a difference. For those in Japan, we got no negativity at all, but as a pure show, the show two years ago was far superior. This year beat last year just because the match quality was significantly higher. But as far as one great match after another, it ranks with some of the greatest wrestling shows ever.

As far as the announcing went, it was a unique experience. Jim Ross and Matt Striker were out there with little but an English format sheet. There was no producer. There was no direction. They had never worked together before. They were never shown on camera, which surprised me, because there was only one video feed, which was for the Japanese audience. Still, WWE usually gives a brief look at the Spanish or German announcers when they are broadcasting live from ringside. Once they continued to talk over a Japanese video package because they had no clue it was airing until they saw it on their monitor and stopped. They didn't know finishes. They were told to sign off after the interview with the winner in the ring, so they signed off. And the show continued a few more minutes, ending when Tanahashi, after retaining his title over

Okada, posed and the pyro went off.

They started out a little disjointed. It was a completely unfamiliar surrounding for both. While both had studied “book knowledge,” of the competitors, it was still very much a new experience. But from the fourth match on, they really clicked. Ross made the Minoru Suzuki vs. Kazushi Sakuraba match seem important, claiming it was the best student of Karl Gotch against the best student of Billy Robinson, and with the line that there are fans in this arena who have waited their entire lives (well, 15 years, since Sakuraba became a superstar in Pride) for this match. He really put over Suzuki as something special, and Suzuki was here. He had dropped a ton of weight, and at 46, looked in the best shape he’s looked in close to 20 years, and bleached his hair blond.

There were a few weird moments, including when Striker talked about how Omega swerved New Japan by joining The Bullet Club, Ross didn’t like the insider terminology and just said that he doesn’t know the word swerve. There was also a weird exchange where Striker was talking about Nakamura as the King of Strong Style, and said Strong Style represents the answer to the question of if wrestling was real. It’s a total lack of common sense to bring up the subject of real vs. fake while in the middle of a wrestling broadcast, let alone one of New Japan where most of the matches are meant to be serious sports contests. During the Nakamura vs. Ibushi match, Striker’s went into business for himself with a self-created storyline, saying how Ibushi suffered a major career threatening concussion and a knee strike by Nakamura could end his career. Ibushi did suffer a concussion over the summer, but it was no more career threatening than concussions that WWE wrestlers suffer all the time. He was back after about a month and seemed to have no significant lingering effects. But it was just silly to say because it was a lock that Nakamura was going to hit him with a lot of different knee strikes, and he was not going to end Ibushi’s career. And in the Japanese storyline for the match, Ibushi’s concussion was not the focal point, but it was about a return of their 2013 match of the year from the G-1 Climax tournament (which Striker did talk about as having happened two years earlier).

Striker was good enough with the backgrounds of a lot of the guys Ross didn’t seem as familiar with and while there were hiccups, he greatly complemented Ross and was a great help in particular in the early matches, in putting over Mikey Nicholls & Shane Haste, who Striker who from appearing with them on a recent NOAH tour. Striker knew most of the key moves, although there were key things that transpired that neither really knew, which was understandable. At times Striker, due to his enthusiasm, took over the broadcast as the play-by-play guy. But he wasn’t bad in doing so.

I had no problem with Striker and overall thought he was very good. But I’ll also say that the people watching with me couldn’t stand him from early on and didn’t really change their viewpoint. There were complaints about his continually using insider terminology. He seemed to have the feeling that the people watching were insider fans, and honestly, if the numbers aren’t big, he’ll be correct and his talking was to the audience buying. But the mentality of announcing is you talk to the larger audience, which would be the way to broadcast a normal

PPV.

But once the big matches came, Ross was in his element. In one night, he made every wrestler from the Sakuraba vs. Suzuki match on, come across like a significant star and a unique personality.

In the final two matches, he made Nakamura, Ibushi, Tanahashi and Okada come across like superstars of far more significance than anyone in U.S. wrestling including John Cena comes across today. Striker pushed that Nakamura was his favorite wrestler in the world. Ross made Nakamura come across as a combination of the most charismatic wrestler and the toughest wrestler, and a real larger-than-life star. To his credit, Nakamura in the match also came across as the best wrestler in the world, perhaps by a significant margin.

Ibushi was put over as a young wrestler (he's actually 32, but has a young face and still appeals to teenage girls) who had the chance to break into the top wrestler in the world category with a win. And even after losing, he came across as a guy who was about to become one of the biggest stars in the business. Tanahashi was put over as the company's top star, an all-time great in the business, and the guy who had brought New Japan to the level it is in. And he put Okada over as, for his age, one of the best wrestlers he's ever seen, comparing him to the late Terry Gordy (who was probably the best wrestler at a young age of almost any headliner of the last 50 years), and saying Okada will be the top star in the future and lead the company to even greater heights. He also, from the start put over Okada's dropkick. Okada usually limits his matches to three dropkicks, one early knocking his opponent off the top rope out of the ring, one to the back, and another traditional one, usually in the closing moments. He only did one in this match, but this was 29:30 into a super fast paced match and he got as high as ever.

There were teases that this could be Ross' last broadcast of wrestling. Really, the only way I can see that being the case is if he goes back to WWE. He's getting a lot of offers from everywhere. He is by far the best in the English speaking world at the ability to get talent over as an announcer. In the end, it was probably the best English language broadcast of a pro wrestling event in years. While Mike Tenay was great at Bound for Glory, significantly better when it came to Japanese history and real knowledge of the product when he did the combined Wrestle-1 and TNA show, he did not have anywhere close to the product and matches to work with.

The next New Japan tour is the annual Fantastica Mania shows with CMLL, running from 1/13 to 1/19. After the last couple of years, the tour is on paper a letdown. There are too many guys from CMLL on this tour like Mr. Niebla (who has charisma but is old and pretty much washed up in the ring), Gran Guerrero, Polvora and even Stigma, who don't belong. But putting Mistico (who may not be ready to return after a serious auto accident nearly nine months ago), Gran Guerrero and Polvora in singles matches is really questionable. Rush being injured hurts, as does not having guys like Fuego, Titan and others who can get over in Japan. It's interesting they don't even have people like Maximo, El Terrible and Rey Bucanero, who have done New Japan regular tours in recent years. A lot is built around Mistico (not Myzteziz, but the CMLL wrestler, formerly Dragon Lee, who took over the role), who will be expected to be a super high

flyer like he was on last year's tour.

The 1/13 show in Osaka, which will air on television in Japan, is headlined by Hiroshi Tanahashi & Volador Jr. & Atlantis vs. Kazuchika Okada & Ultimo Guerrero & Gran Guerrero, and Kushida & Captain New Japan & Mascara Dorada vs. Ryusuke Taguchi & Tetsuya Naito & La Sombra.

The 1/14 show in Takamatsu has Tiger Mask & Tanahashi & Dorada vs. Taguchi & Naito & Sombra as the main event, plus Atlantis & Volador Jr. & Captain New Japan vs. Shinsuke Nakamura & Ultimo Guerrero & Gran Guerrero.

The 1/15 show in Kyoto has Tanahashi & Volador Jr. & Atlantis vs. Nakamura & Ultimo Guerrero & Gran Guerrero, and Jushin Liger & Triton & Dorada vs. Taguchi & Naito & Sombra.

The 1/16 show at Shin-Kiba a 600-seat Arena in Tokyo, has a one night tag team tournament with first round matchers of Stuka Jr. & Rey Cometa vs. Barbaro Cavernario & Mr. Niebla, Stigma & Volador Jr. vs. Ultimo Guerrero & Gran Guerrero, Triton & Mistico (who returns on 1/13 after more than eight months out of action from an automobile accident that threatened to end his career) vs. Mephisto & Polvora and Atlantis & Dorada vs. Naito & Sombra.

There are two shows on New Japan World.

The 1/18 show from Korakuen Hall (4:30 a.m. Eastern Sunday morning; 1:30 a.m. Pacific) has Liger & Angel de Oro vs. Yoshi-Hashi & Ishii, Tiger Mask vs. Gedo, Kushida & Triton & Cometa vs. Okumura & Cavernario & Niebla, Captain New Japan & Mascara Don (Manabu Nakanishi) & Dorada vs. Taguchi & Naito & Sombra, Volador Jr. defends the NWA historic welterweight title against Gran Guerrero, Mephisto defends the Mexican national light heavyweight title against Stuka Jr., Tanahashi & Stigma & Mistico vs. Okada & Nakamura & Polvora, and Atlantis vs. Ultimo Guerrero on top in the match to give the Japanese fans a chance to see the same match that headlined the CMLL anniversary show.

The final show of the tour is 1/19 at Korakuen Hall (4:30 a.m. Eastern Sunday morning; 1:30 a.m. Pacific) with Kushida & Tiger Mask & Liger & Stuka Jr. vs. Gedo & Yoshi-Hashi & Ishii, Captain New Japan & Triton vs. Naito & Taguchi, Stigma & Angel de Oro vs. Mephisto & Gran Guerrero, Cometa vs. Cavernario, Mistico vs. Polvora, Ibushi & Tanahashi & Volador Jr. & Atlantis vs. Okada & Nakamura & Niebla & Ultimo Guerrero, and Sombra vs. Dorada in what may be their first singles match and one that will likely be an incredible high flying spectacle.

At Fantastica Mania, the New Japan guys work the Lucha style and they work the matches to give the CMLL stars more of the spotlight. It's treated as more fun shows than the hard hitting killer matches like a usual PPV card will have.

1. Yuji Nagata won the New Japan Rumble in 26:09. This was the pre-show match, designed to get everyone on the card and have a few older surprises. The match wasn't good at all, and the crowd was pretty empty when it started since tickets listed a 4 p.m. local start time and this match went into the ring at about 3:20 p.m. Only a few names were advertised and they promoted that you wouldn't know who was in the match until their music played. They

advertised that two men would start and that every minute, a new person would come in, but like WWE, there were no consistent times used for entry. Unlike WWE, eliminations could be via pin, submission, or over the top rope. The standouts were “The Young Lions,” Yohei Komatsu and Sho Tanaka, working like a tag team against the veterans. The big pops came from the three surprises, Hiro Saito (54), Yoshiaki Fujiwara (65) and Great Kabuki (66). But after all the silliness, there was a story to it, that Nagata started the match and survived the entire match and won, and next thing you know, he’s headlining a PPV next month against Nakamura for the IC title. Tiger Mask and Nagata opened. Taichi came in at 1:18, and started singing with his mic stand. He called out Taka Michinoku and Desperado to come out with him. So they all entered at the same time, which was silly to say the least. All three were beating down Tiger Mask and Nagata until Jushin Liger came in at 3:37. Next in, at 5:01, was Tanaka, who the crowd popped for. Saito was next in, at 6:41. The crowd reacted to the surprise. Saito was not moving well at all. The announcers put him over as “Mr. Senton,” and the crowd just wanted to see him give everyone sentons, which he did. Saito’s body looked good for his age but his beard was gray. Komatsu was in at 8:24. At 9:47, Captain New Japan came in, all in green, chopping everyone. At 11:17, Tama Tonga came in. Tonga eliminated Captain at 11:28. Liger went to the top rope to give Desperado a Frankensteiner, but Desperado gave him a low blow and went to throw him over the top, but Liger held on, and they both went over. This made sense given Desperado was getting an NWA jr. title match with him the next day. Yoshi-Hashi entered at 12:30. Manabu Nakanishi was in at 14:33. He looked in better shape than usual. Fujiwara entered at 16:29, head-butting everyone. Fujiwara has the same entrance music as Daniel Bryan and I did hear about people watching on New Japan World hearing that music freaking out. Fujiwara has been using it since the early 80s and Bryan using it probably is because he was a fan of Fujiwara. Next in was Kabuki at 18:26. Fans popped big for Kabuki, since nobody expected him. He did his nunchakus in the aisle and came in and did the short Kabuki uppercut punches. He blew mist at Michinoku and people wanted to see that. But he was eliminated right away by Suzuki-gun. Fujiwara put Michinoku in the Fujiwara armbar, which was another spot they had to do, and he submitted. Everyone then jumped on Fujiwara while he was down and pinned him in 20:29. Tanaka gave Taichi a sunset flip and Komatsu used a bridge on him for the pin at 20:52. Saito hit a senton on Komatsu, but he missed a second one off the top rope and everyone jumped on Saito and pinned him in 21:37. Komatsu & Tanaka then hit Tiger Mask with a double dropkick, sending him over the top at 22:20. Nakanishi did a double Northern Lights suplex on both Komatsu & Tanaka and put Tanaka in the torture rack in 23:13 for the submission. Then, in a huge shock, Komatsu pinned Nakanishi with an inside cradle in 22:34. Tonga then pinned Komatsu after a DDT in 24:05. It came down to Tonga, Yoshi-Hashi and Nagata. Tonga tried a Stinger splash in the corner, but Yoshi-Hashi ducked and Tonga flew over the top rope at 24:39. This left Nagata with Yoshi-Hashi, and Nagata got the pin with a bridging back suplex.

*1/2

2. Bobby Fish & Kyle O’Reilly retained the IWGP jr. tag team titles over Alex Shelley & Kushida, The Young Bucks and Rocky Romero & Alex Koslov in 13:01.

Fast paced match with constant action. It felt a little rushed, but not as bad as many had feared.

Too many spots to list. Romero did a double clothesline on both Jacksons, who both took spin

bumps. There was an incredible DDT by Kushida on Matt. O'Reilly came off the apron with a flying knee aimed at Shelley, but instead Shelley superkicked him for the first superkick of the match. Then it was dive time. Romero did a tope on everyone. Koslov did a flip dive. Nick dove through Matt's legs with a twisting dive on everyone. Kushida did a somersault dive on everyone. Then the Bucks did a bunch of superkicks. In a crazy spot, both Bucks were held up in electric chair position and Romero came off the top rope with a double doomsday device. Both Bucks did a flip dive off the clothesline, and landed on their feet and superkicked Romero. More superkicks led to the Meltzer driver on Koslov. Striker did call it, but you could tell he so badly didn't want to, nor did Ross. Fish broke up an attempt at More Bang for your buck. There was a wild DDT into a German suplex spot by Fish & O'Reilly. Fish top rope falcon arrow on Nick and then Fish & O'Reilly did the double team chasing the dragon on Koslov for the pin. ****

3. Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Tomoaki Honma beat Yujiro Takahashi & Jeff Jarrett & Bad Luck Fale in 5:35. This was rushed, with the big surprise finish of Honma finally getting his major win. Karen Jarrett was at ringside and Takahashi also brought out a bikini model with him, but she was never seen again after the ring entrance. Usually in a big show Takahashi match you get the gratuitous shots of her, but this was rushed. Crowd picked up for Honma when he got in. For the finish, Karen distracted referee Massao Hattori. Jarrett went to hit Honma with a guitar shot, which everyone figured would be the finish, but Honma moved and Jarrett instead hit Takahashi. Jim Ross pulled out the Ed Whalen "Malfunction in the Junction" line. Honma then pinned Yujiro after the diving head-butt. **1/4

4. Toru Yano & Naomichi Marufuji & Mikey Nicholls & Shane Haste beat Takashi Iizuka & Shelton Benjamin & Davey Boy Smith Jr. & Lance Archer in 5:15. A lot of comedy. Yano undid the turnbuckle padding but Iizuka hit Yano with the big turnbuckle padding. Pretty much everyone got a spot in and it was rushed. Archer & Smith used the Hart attack on Yano. Haste did a great dropkick. Nicholls did a powerslam on Smith. Haste & Nicholls did a double press slam on Archer. Archer did a ridiculously high choke slam on Shane. Benjamin jumped from the mat to the top rope without climbing and gave Marufuji an overhead belly to belly that pretty much sent him into orbit all the way across the ring, probably three-quarters of the way. Iizuka pulled out the iron fingers but Marufuji superkicked him and the iron fingers went flying. Marufuji then pinned Iizuka with a Tiger uppercut kneelift. Way too short, but some great athleticism by a lot of big guys here. **

5. Minoru Suzuki beat Kazushi Sakuraba in 9:21 in a UWF rules match, which meant it could only end via knockout, referee stop or submission. This had the major history of being a first-time ever dream match, with Suzuki, the first Japanese to win what would now be called a major MMA world title when he was Pancrase champion in 1995. The match Suzuki won the title from Ken Shamrock in had a predetermined worked finish since Shamrock had a UFC match with Dan Severn that year. Shamrock ended up winning that match and becoming UFC's superfight champion, the predecessor to the current UFC world heavyweight champion, so by all realities, Shamrock should have been a double world champion at the time. But Pancrase couldn't allow for the chance of its world champion losing to a pro wrestler from a rival promotion, since Severn worked at the time for UWFI. Sakuraba

was Japan's greatest MMA fighter during the early Pride boom period, and was really the guy responsible for the mainstream Japan MMA boom with his win over Royce Gracie. Great matwork early. Sakuraba, who has a sense of pro wrestling history, tried for a scorpion deathlock (when he was a kid, that was Riki Choshu's finisher long before Sting and Bret Hart copied the move in the U.S.). They ended up fighting on the floor. Suzuki did a windsprint down the ramp but Sakuraba at the last second nailed him with a spin kick. They had a good striking exchange on the floor until Sakuraba got the Kimura on Suzuki. The story is that the match could only be won clean in the ring, so the ref physically broke up the Kimura. Suzuki sold like his left arm was broken and worked with one arm for the rest of the match. Suzuki selling was great. Sakuraba kicked the hell out of him, mostly the bad arm, but everywhere, and Suzuki went down, but he got up before the count of ten. Then they started trading and Suzuki, using only his right, knocked Sakuraba down with a slap. Sakuraba got an armbar on but Suzuki made the ropes. Sakuraba kept kicking the arm but Suzuki knocked him down with slaps and a knee, and Suzuki finally grabbed a choke. He held it on, used a choke suplex and Sakuraba tapped out. An incredible overall performance here by Suzuki. How you viewed this match depends on knowing the style and psychology of what they were doing. Even a layperson would know it was good, but hardcore fans and those in the business thought this was fantastic. My only negative is that I wish they had a few more minutes. ***3/4

6. Togi Makabe pinned Tomohiro Ishii in 12:23 to win the Never Open weight

championship. Super hard-hitting match. Exactly what you'd expect from a big show Ishii match. They traded powerslams early. They traded the hard slaps and chops in a super stiff battle. Ishii used his delayed superplex. Both used power bombs. Makabe hit a German suplex and set up the German superplex, but Ishii knocked him off the ropes, almost. Makabe hung on with his legs, did a sit-up to get back up to the top, and used a Death Valley bomb off the top rope for a near fall. Makabe killed him with a lariat and Ishii kicked out at one. Ishii used a German suplex and Makabe kicked out at one. They were then killing each other with lariats. Makabe did a Rikidozan chop to Ishii's bad left shoulder. Ishii came back with a head-butt but Makabe kicked out. Makabe got a near fall with a dragon suplex. They traded elbows standing and head-butts. Makabe started hitting Ishii with old Ivan Putski Polish hammers. Makabe killed Ishii with a lariat and won with a kneedrop off the top rope, right onto Ishii's bad shoulder, for the pin. ****1/2

7. Kenny Omega pinned Ryusuke Taguchi to win the IWGP jr. heavyweight title in

13:20. This was Omega's debut as a full-timer on the New Japan roster. A lot of the Bullet Club came out with him. One of the Young Bucks yelled, "Let's break Eddy Guerrero's neck," a reference to the fact Taguchi tries to wrestle like Eddy Guerrero and even has the Guerrero mustache. Physically, he's like a Japanese Hector Guerrero more than Eddy. Taguchi used a flying hip attack, as it's known in Japan, or a butt bump as it was called when King Parsons did it in World Class 30 years ago. Striker then brought up Parsons. Omega sprayed stuff in Taguchi's eyes. I think it was the pain numbing spray they use in New Japan when guys get hurt during a match. Then Omega sprayed the stuff down his own pants and under his arms. Omega did his unique power suplex where he gets the guy up, then puts him almost all the way down,

but holds him at the bottom where the leverage is ridiculously hard, then picks him back up and delivers the suplex. That's a Cesaro-like feat of strength. Omega rubbed his forearm hair into Taguchi's eyes. The Young Bucks tripped Taguchi. Taguchi came back and backdropped Omega over the top rope. He then did the Prince Devitt pose (Taguchi was Devitt's partner for years and since Devitt left, he's inherited the spot) and followed with a running flip dive over the top onto all three. Taguchi went for the three Amigos (hence the Guerrero reference), but Omega blocked the third. Omega went for a high jumping famouser for a near fall. Omega has a lot of heel Brian Pillman in him between the hair and the facial expressions and even the face itself. Omega went for a running power bomb into the turnbuckles, but Taguchi at the last second turned it into a huracanrana into the turnbuckles. Great spot. Taguchi followed with a sit out power bomb and a missile dropkick. Omega used a doctor bomb. Omega went for Croyt's Wrath, an electric chair power bomb, but Omega reversed into a front rolling cradle for a near fall. Taguchi came back with a flying knee, his dodon finisher and an ankle lock. Omega broke it. There was involvement in taking out the Bucks. Omega used a hip attack into a dragon suplex, a flying knee and finished him with the One winged angel, which is an electric chair into a ki krusher, for the pin. ***3/4

Current note: The Tokyo Dome debut of Kenny Omega as a talented, but heavily comedy-oriented junior heavyweight champion.

8. Katsuyori Shibata & Hirooki Goto beat Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows in 9:00 to win the IWGP tag team titles. Amber O'Neal Hankinson, the wife of Gallows, was in their corner as The Bullet Babe. From what I understand, she is going to be a regular part of the Bullet Club going forward, particularly in Anderson & Gallows matches. There was the tease of problems as Goto accidentally nailed Shibata with a lariat, knocking him off the apron. Shibata took a bad bump and was selling, so Goto had to work alone for the next several minutes. Gallows used a superkick on Goto. Anderson used a jumping kick on Goto. The Bullet Babe slapped Goto. They continued to work on Goto until Shibata recovered and tagged in. But Gallows cut him off quickly with a forearm and then ran through him. Shibata came back with a dropkick and an abdominal stretch on Anderson. Shibata & Goto did a double suplex on Gallows. Anderson kicked Goto in the head and used a back suplex neckbreaker for a near fall. Shibata went for the penalty kick on Anderson, but Gallows nailed both Shibata & Goto with a double clothesline. Gallows used a tree slam on Shibata for a near fall. The finish saw Shibata hit Anderson with a running kick. They did a double team GTS on Anderson followed by Shibata using the penalty kick (running kick to the chest) and got the pin. This match was great, a cut above the previous times these guys have wrestled, but it was too short to be a classic.

***1/2

9. A.J. Styles pinned Tetsuya Naito in 14:25. The story here is they were putting over the Styles clash as this killer move, which is what Gedo's current booking story is. Styles went for the move right away, and Naito struggled like crazy to get out of it. Styles backdropped Naito over the top rope. Styles then went for a moonsault off the apron, but Naito moved. Styles landed on his feet and Naito hit him with a dropkick off the apron. Naito hit a missile dropkick and Styles took a big bump on it. Styles came back to work on Naito's left knee. There was an

ugly neckbreaker spot when Naito lost his footing. Styles went for a German suplex, but Naito reversed into a front rolling cradle. Naito used a German suplex and a flying forearm. He went up for his Stardust press finisher. Styles got up, hit him and Naito crotched himself on the top. Styles used a back superplex. Naito was selling the knee and Styles went to work with the calf slicer. Great struggle before Naito made the ropes. Naito came back with an enzuigiri and uranage, and then a dragon suplex for a near fall. Styles used a Pele kick and the bloody Sunday DDT (the move he took over when Prince Devitt left). He set up the Styles clash, but Naito backdropped Styles over the top and Styles took the bump on the floor on his back which was a very dangerous landing. The finish saw Naito put Styles on the top rope and go for a Frankensteiner off the top. Styles stopped him in mid-move and went for a Styles clash off the middle rope. There was a big panicked struggle by Naito trying to get out, but Styles locked him in it and jumped off. ****1/4

10. Shinsuke Nakamura retained the IC title pinning Kota Ibushi in 20:12. Ross put Nakamura over as one of the most charismatic athletes in the world, comparing his unique charisma which he said he got from his love of Freddy Mercury and Michael Jackson, with the fact he's an ass kicker, noting he fought in MMA. They pumped him up as maybe the greatest talent in the business, and Nakamura in this match came across as the best wrestler in the world today. Nakamura was the only guy who got a special ring entrance. He came out looking like the Statue of Liberty, and others thought it was a King outfit because he's the King of Strong Style. In actuality, he was dressed as King Zarkon from Voltron in the Japanese version of Emperor Daibazaal. Ibushi missed a dropkick and Nakamura went to work with knees. They traded spots and Nakamura went for a handshake. When Ibushi did it, Nakamura gave him a knee and an ax kick. He went for a bom a ye, but Ibushi moved and dropkicked Nakamura in the back. Ibushi then did Nakamura's spots, the vibration kick in the corner and then did Nakamura's mannerisms. Nakamura took over with a knee, a running knee on the apron and a kneedrop off the apron while Ibushi was draped on the apron. Nakamura was slapping him around. Nakamura used a back stabber and went for a back suplex, but Ibushi landed on his feet and hit a Frankensteiner. Ibushi used a dropkick off the apron and followed with a moonsault off the top rope to the floor onto Nakamura. Back in the ring, Ibushi used a springboard hard dropkick. Ibushi went for a German suplex, but Nakamura blocked it. Ibushi had hard kicks, used a standing shooting star press for a near fall and went for a springboard, but Nakamura caught him coming off with a kick to the head. Nakamura used a spin kick and Pride style knees to the head of a grounded opponent. Nakamura missed the bom a ye and Ibushi landed a hard knee. He did a hard snap dragon suplex and a standing corkscrew moonsault for a near fall. Ibushi hit him with a roundhouse kick and Nakamura sold like he was knocked out. Ibushi used a last ride power bomb for a near fall. Ibushi missed his Phoenix splash finisher. Nakamura used a bom a ye to the back of the head. Nakamura was stomping and kicking the hell out of Ibushi. Ibushi came back with punches. Nakamura threw the ref into Ibushi and sucker punched Ibushi, knocking him down. In one of the spots of the night, Ibushi went for a clothesline and Nakamura moved, jumped up and took him down with a flying armbar. Ibushi broke it up doing hard stomps to the head. Ibushi then used Nakamura's reverse powerslam, and then nailed Nakamura with a bom a ye, but Nakamura kicked out at one. They

traded vicious attacks, punches to the back of the head and stomps to the head. Nakamura kicked Ibushi in the face. There was an incredible spot as Nakamura was coming off the ropes, Ibushi jumped up for a leap frog, Nakamura slid underneath him and Ibushi landed with a double foot stomp to the chest. Ibushi then did the move of the match. With Nakamura on the apron, Ibushi climbed to the top rope and brought Nakamura, who was standing on the apron, up for a German suplex into the ring which was as Cesaro type of feat of strength. Ibushi went for the Phoenix plex, that his best friend invented and taught him, but Nakamura broke it up with a head-butt and started throwing elbows like crazy. Nakamura hit a bomb a ye to the back, a back stabber, a falcon arrow and finally a regular bomb a ye for the pin. This was an all-time classic match. *****

Current note: A few years later, historian Dan Lennard watched every single match of the year winner in Observer history and wrote that this was the best of all of them. It was the first ***** match ever at the Tokyo Dome. It wouldn't be the last. In fact, many feel the very next match should have been the next. Very few shows in history ever ended with two matches of this caliber. Well, history through 2015, because really it was these two matches that changed the mentality of what headlining the Tokyo Dome means.

11. Hiroshi Tanahashi pinned Kazuchika Okada in 30:57 to retain the IWGP heavyweight title. These two had the handicap of trying to follow the previous match. So they started slow with basic wrestling spots off a headlock takeover. The heat started when Okada, on a rope break, nailed Tanahashi with a sucker elbow. Tanahashi came back with elbows. Tanahashi went to the top rope, but Okada, instead of doing the dropkick, nailed him with a forearm and knocked Tanahashi off to the floor. He whipped Tanahashi into the guard rail and gave him a draping DDT off the barricade. Okada went for a tombstone piledriver on the ramp, but Tanahashi got out and used body punches, a jawbreaker and went for a windsprint clothesline. Okada then gave Tanahashi a heavy rain (similar to a Goldberg jackhammer) on the ramp. Okada threw him back in and kept on him until he missed a senton. Tanahashi then came off the middle rope with a flip senton. Okada came back with a swanton and also used a somersault senton from the apron back into the ring. They traded elbows standing. Both grabbed the other by the hair. Tanahashi threw an elbow to the knee. Tanahashi used a power Suwa dropkick, but missed the high fly flow. Okada came back with a running elbow and a neckbreaker over the knee for a near fall. Okada came off the top rope with a Randy Savage elbow. He went for the rainmaker, but Tanahashi ducked and cradled him, and then used a dragon screw. Okada rolled outside and Tanahashi back dropped Okada over the guard rail. Tanahashi then did a ridiculous plancha off the top rope onto Okada, who was on the other side of the guard rail. For a guy with Tanahashi's knees, wear-and-tear and weight, that was nuts. Okada came back and went for the rainmaker, but Tanahashi beat him to the punch with a sling blade. Tanahashi used a crossbody off the top rope, but Okada rolled through and picked Tanahashi up for a tombstone piledriver. Tanahashi reversed and hit the tombstone on Okada. He went for a high fly flow to the back of Okada, who kicked out. He did a second high fly flow, and Okada kicked out. This spot worked because the regular high fly flow hadn't been kicked out of all year. Okada finally hit the rainmaker, but Tanahashi kicked out. They traded elbows.

Okada went for another tombstone piledriver, but Tanahashi turned it into an inside cradle and then dropkicked Okada in the knee. Tanahashi started with hard slaps, and then went for a backslide. Okada went for the rainmaker, but Tanahashi ducked and hit a German suplex. Okada came back with his own German suplex for a near fall. Okada went for another rainmaker, and this time Tanahashi used a dragon suplex for a near fall. Okada finally hit his dropkick. He went for the rainmaker again, but Tanahashi used a reverse dragon screw over the ropes. Okada's leg was draped on the ropes and Tanahashi came off the top with a high fly flow. He followed with two more high fly flows for the pin. The post-match made it even more epic, and Okada was breaking down, crying as he was leaving the ring, while Tanahashi grabbed the mic and said to him that the IWGP title is so far away from you right now. Tanahashi then thanked the fans for their support. I may have to watch this again. It was a fantastic match even following an even better match. But I wonder how it would look if I saw it on a standalone basis. It may have come across even better since it did feel like an epic match of the year. ****3/4

JANUARY 4, 2016

Current note: Business at this show, for the first time in years, was down from the year before. And in one fell swoop, four major stars, and two of the company's "big four," A.J. Styles, Shinsuke Nakamura, Karl Anderson and Doc Gallows left the promotion for WWE. To say things looked bleak was an overstatement. But, it did look like the Tokyo Dome peak was in 2015. Most of the time, when top guys leave like this, it's a huge blow. Only rarely, like when Genichiro Tenryu, Great Kabuki and Yoshiaki Yatsu left All Japan for WAR, it ends up a blessing in disguise due to the emergence of Mitsuharu Misawa, Kenta Kobashi, Toshiaki Kawada, Terry Gordy and Steve Williams. Nakamura leaving led to the ascension of Tetsuya Naito and LIJ, the biggest merchandise mover in company history. Styles departure led to junior heavyweight Kenny Omega getting his spot, and Omega and Okada took everything to yet a new level, leading to others like Tomohiro Ishii, Minoru Suzuki, Kota Ibushi, Katsuyori Shibata and others to also greatly elevate their game. And even though his body seemed held together by tape and fraying ligaments and tendons, Hiroshi Tanahashi would not let the pack pass him by.

As its top star, Hiroshi Tanahashi was the driving force in bringing New Japan Pro Wrestling from near total collapse a few years ago, to tripling business,

In 2012, Kazuchika Okada, fresh off a run in TNA where he was used as a masked character out of someone's childhood in watching the Green Hornet television show, was brought back to Gedo to eventually be the top star of the promotion.

Before Okada came back to Japan on the January 4, 2012, show at the Tokyo Dome, he was already groomed to win the IWGP heavyweight title from Tanahashi on February 12, 2012, in Osaka. The decision was controversial since Okada did not get over strong in a quick prelim win over Yoshi-Hashi at the Dome show. He and Tanahashi tore the house down in Osaka, but at the time, Tanahashi was the best wrestler in the world, and always tearing the house down. But it was in a title defense the next month at Korakuen Hall over Tetsuya Naito, an even better match than his title win, where it was clear that Okada, then just 24, was at some point going to

be the guy to carry the company.

Over the next four years, the Tanahashi vs. Okada program became the standard of what fans of a generation in Japan will look back at as the legendary rival of the era, like Mitsuharu Misawa against Toshiaki Kawada, Jumbo Tsuruta against Genichiro Tenryu, Tatsumi Fujinami against Riki Choshu, Antonio Inoki against Stan Hansen, Jack Brisco against Dory Funk Jr., Giant Baba against Gene Kiniski and Rikidozan against The Destroyer were remembered in previous generations.

The two elevated the business outside the ring, and the standard of a main event championship match inside the ring. But nothing lasts forever.

Going into Wrestle Kingdom 10, it was clear that even though there had not been a singles match between the two in one year, this was like the closing stretch of Brisco-Funk or Austin-Rock, where they went out there, no doubt still very good, but the peak was over. Most feuds are only strong for a few months, and this was four years as the two top guys in the promotion.

Wrestle Kingdom 9 ended with Tanahashi retaining his title and Okada in tears, outside the ring. With their third Dome main event in four years, with Tanahashi winning the previous ones, the story of this was the changing of the eras. Okada winning would put the stamp on the inevitable, that time had moved on and it was Okada's time to carry the promotion. While Okada could not match Tanahashi's overall appeal or charisma, Tanahashi's body was breaking down, and he had just turned 39. The long hair and body that teenage girls and young kids loved role was running its course.

He could, and did put on great main events when he was put in that position on big shows, having incredible classics with A.J. Styles and Shinsuke Nakamura on the last two nights of the G-1 tournament as well as with Kota Ibushi earlier in the tournament. But you only have to look at the New Japan mid-card, and see people like Satoshi Kojima, Yuji Nagata and Hiroyoshi Tenzan, all capable of incredible matches when they were champions in Japan, and know the shelf-life of a wrestlers' body, that things change in their 40s. They can be brought back and put in main events, but their days of carrying the promotion are over.

In many ways, although New Japan doesn't have the mainstream exposure to be quite at the same level as the past, the Tanahashi era is very much like the Hogan era in the late 80s WWF and the Flair era in the 80s WCW. And while completely different, Okada is very much in the position of Ultimate Warrior and Sting, who were thought for years to be the successors. But in both cases, business wasn't the same.

Even without the upcoming departures, Okada, like Sting and Warrior, is getting to be the face of the company, but without the right rival to do top-tier business. With Nakamura and Styles leaving, Okada has people that have had their shots in the past and are clearly not cut out for the big title, like next contender Hirooki Goto, Tetsuya Naito, Togi Makabe or cult favorite Tomohiro Ishii. He's left with Kota Ibushi, whose future is in jeopardy due to needing serious neck surgery, and Tanahashi comebacks.

wrestling and MMA, just four days into 2016, may have both produced their matches of the year. Finally, on the biggest stage, it was Tanahashi, clearly defeated after three rainmaker clotheslines, being helped out while Okada had the center stage win that Tanahashi had six of the last seven years.

New Japan had been a company in decline since around 1999, and the sold out Tokyo Dome tradition ended a few years later. The 1/4 show, the company's annual showcase, had gone down for the most part for more than a decade, with a blip in 2009 when Tanahashi beat outsider legend Keiji Muto to win the belt back for New Japan in 2009.

But the declines continued. In 2011, when they repeated the same angle from 2009, this time with outsider Satoshi Kojima holding the IWGP title, setting up Tanahashi to once again win it back for New Japan, the show only drew 18,000 fans.

From that point on, every year increased, doubling to 36,000 in 2015 for the Tanahashi vs. Okada main event. But the declines in business slightly noticeable after the Dome, and more noticeable during the G-1 tournament, the company's other showcase event, showed that the constant increase in popularity had ended.

Tanahashi vs. Okada drew 25,204 fans for their latest battle on 1/4 at the Tokyo Dome. It should be noted that there have been changes in how attendance is reported, and this is a paid number. The actual number in the crowd, while down from the last two years, was actually more than the 29,000 for the 2013 show, also headlined by Tanahashi vs. Okada. So the number itself wasn't as bad as some thought, given the comparison to 36,000 last year, but you also can no longer ignore nor pretend that the peak hasn't passed, and that even this level will be very tough to maintain.

That has nothing to do with match quality and show quality. While I didn't think this year's Dome show could match last year's Wrestle Kingdom 9, it was still a fantastic show, particularly the last three matches. I think Nakamura vs. Ibushi last year in some ways was better than Tanahashi vs. Okada, but when it came to drama and significance, Tanahashi vs. Okada this year felt bigger than any matches last year. Athletically, last year's Tanahashi vs. Okada match was better, but it was going to be because of all the mileage on Tanahashi. A.J. Styles vs. Nakamura was a very legitimate match of the year contender, and very different. The other big one, Tomohiro Ishii vs. Katsuyori Shibata, was exactly what you'd expect. It was not their best match against each other, but it was still a fantastic match.

But this year ended up more newsworthy, as the departures necessitated booking changes. New Year's Dash, the next day, was filled with major angles.

The big angle for the week was The Bullet Club turning on A.J. Styles. If something with WWE were to go wrong, the angle is a tremendous setup for his return. The crowd reacted great, with Styles coming out of it as a super babyface.

While Tanahashi and Nakamura both retained their titles at the Dome, there were changes in five championships on a card that had eight championship matches.

The Young Bucks captured the IWGP jr. tag titles in the four-way over previous champs Kyle O'Reilly & Bobby Fish, as well as tournament winners Ricochet & Matt Sydal, and Rocky Romero & Trent Baretta.

Mark & Jay Briscoe, in their New Japan debut, teamed with Toru Yano to become the first NEVER trios champions beating The Bullet Club group of Bad Luck Fale & Tama Tonga & Yujiro Takahashi.

Kushida captured the IWGP jr. title from Kenny Omega, which ended up weird because that was the plan, but Omega does the Chael Sonnen in losing at a lighter weight, talking big and getting the heavyweight shot.

Togi Makabe & Tomoaki Honma beat Doc Gallows & Karl Anderson to win the IWGP heavyweight tag titles, which got a big reaction given it was Honma's first title win in New Japan.

And Shibata beat Ishii to win the Never title.

Aside from Tanahashi and Nakamura, the only champion to retain was ROH champion Jay Lethal, who beat Michael Elgin.

They are doing two PPV shows in February, the 2/11 New Beginnings in Osaka at the Edion Arena, and a 2/14 show called New Beginnings in Niigata. The title matches will be split between the two shows.

Based on New Year's Dash, the title matches look to be Okada vs. Hirooki Goto (which is almost a lock for the Osaka main event) for the IWGP title, Nakamura vs. Omega for the IC title would have been the probable Niigata main event, but timing-wise, they look to not be able to do it there, which may leave them going with a Shibata vs. Ishii main event for the Never belt. The other title matches set up are Honma & Makabe defending against Anderson & Gallows for the IWGP heavyweight tag titles, Kushida vs. Bushi for the IWGP jr. title and Young Bucks vs. Ricochet & Sydal for the IWGP jr. tag titles.

However, the advances in both Osaka and Niigata started off weak, which was very concerning for Osaka. Osaka has been a super hot market during the growth period, but fell off for both the G-1 and tag team tournament shows this year.

As is tradition at the Tokyo Dome, New Japan announced its key events between now and the end of the G-1 Climax tournament. Besides the New Beginnings shows and Fantastica Mania, they will have ROH and New Japan joint shows at Korakuen Hall on 2/19 and 2/20. That will be followed by joint shows on 2/26 and 2/27 at Sam's Town in Las Vegas, the former being the ROH Anniversary PPV and latter being a TV taping.

In March, they will have the New Japan Cup with big shows on 3/3 and the finals on 3/12, which will be that month's major show. The big April show will be Invasion Attack on 4/10 at Sumo Hall. Wrestling Dontaku will be 5/3 at the Fukuoka International Center Arena. The Best of the Super Juniors tournament finals will be 6/6 at Sun Plaza Hall in Sendai. The biggest PPV between now and the G-1 Climax tournament will be Dominion on 6/19 at Osaka Jo Hall. The

G-1 Climax tournament will start on 7/18 in Sapporo, so it will once again be like last year and a four week tournament. Also like last year, it will conclude with three straight nights at Sumo Hall, with shows on 8/12, which will likely be the A block finals, 8/13, which will likely be the B block finals, and the championship match will be on 8/14.

The company also announced a partnership with Amuse, the biggest talent agency in Asia, which not only books talent but also produces prime time network television shows. The partnership was announced on 1/5 with New Japan head Takaaki Kidani, Amuse CEO Nobuyuki Soma, and Tanahashi. The goal is to increase the star power of New Japan wrestlers by getting them more mainstream visibility in television shows, movies and television commercials.'

There are also plans for a longer-term relationship with Momoka Arayasu, the pop singing star who came out with Jado at the Tokyo Dome at the end of the New Japan Rumble.

Next on the agenda for New Japan is Fantastica Mania, which runs from 1/17 to 1/24. The final three shows, on 1/22, 1/23 and 1/24, all at Korakuen Hall, will air live on New Japan World at 5:30 a.m. Eastern time all three days. The other show this month on New Japan World will be another 5:30 a.m. show from Korakuen Hall on 1/30.

These are the Fantastica Mania cards:

*1/17 in Kochi: Kushida & Stuka Jr. vs. Sho Tanaka & Yohei Komatsu; The Panther & Guerrero Maya Jr. vs. Bobby Z & Okumura; Fuego & Titan vs. Yoshi-Hashi & Barbaro Cavernario; Jay White & Dragon Lee vs. Virus & Hechicero; Juice Robinson & Mascara Dorada & Atlantis vs. Bushi & Evil & Tetsuya Naito; Ryusuke Taguchi & Volador Jr. vs. Nakamura & Mephisto; and Jushin Liger & Tanahashi & Mistico vs. Gedo & Okada & Ultimo Guerrero.

*1/19 in Kyoto: Taguchi & Fuego vs. Tanaka & Komatsu; Panther vs. Okumura; Maya Jr. vs. Z (rematch of this year's Busca en un Idolo finals), Liger & David Finlay & Lee & Titan vs. Yoshi-Hashi & Virus & Hechicero & Barbaro; Stuka Jr. & Dorada & Atlantis vs. Naito & Evil & Bushi; Mistico & Kushida vs. Gedo & Ultimo Guerrero; Volador Jr. & Tanahashi & Robinson vs. Nakamura & Okada & Mephisto.

*1/20 in Osaka at the second Edion Arena: Liger & Stuka Jr. vs. Tanaka & Komatsu; Panther vs. Z; Maya Jr. vs. Okumura; White & Taguchi & Kushida & Titan vs. Barbaro & Hechicero & Yoshi-Hashi & Gedo; Atlantis & Dorada & Fuego vs. Naito & Bushi & Evil; Mistico & Volador Jr. & Robinson vs. Nakamura & Mephisto & Ultimo Guerrero; Tanahashi & Lee vs. Okada & Virus.

*1/22 at Korakuen Hall in Tokyo: Stuka Jr. & Fuego vs. Tanaka & Komatsu; Liger & Finlay & Kushida & Maya Jr. & Panther vs. Gedo & Yoshi-Hashi & Z & Okumura & Hechicero; Naito & Evil vs. Atlantis & Robinson; Barbaro defends the Mexican national welterweight title against Titan; Bushi defends the CMLL welterweight title against Dorada; Tanahashi & Taguchi & Lee vs. Nakamura & Okada & Virus; Mistico & Volador Jr. vs. Mephisto & Ultimo Guerrero.

1/23 at Korakuen Hall: Titan & Dorada vs. Tanaka & Komatsu; Robinson & Kushida & Fuego vs. Hechicero & Yoshi-Hashi & Gedo; Panther & Maya Jr. defend the Arena Coliseo tag team titles

against Z & Okumura; Taguchi & Stuka Jr. vs. Nakamura & Barbaro; Tiger Mask & Liger & Atlantis vs. Naito & Evil & Bushi; Lee vs. Virus for the CMLL lightweight title (these two have had killer matches in Mexico); Tanahashi & Volador Jr. & Mistico vs. Okada & Ultimo Guerrero & Mephisto.

*1/24 at Korakuen Hall: Panther & Maya Jr. vs. Tanaka & Komatsu; Tiger Mask & Kushida & Fuego & Stuka Jr. & Titan vs. Hechicero & Okumura & Z & Yoshi-Hashi & Gedo; Liger vs. Virus; Atlantis & Dorada & Taguchi vs. Naito & Bushi & Evil; Tanahashi & Lee & Robinson vs. Nakamura & Okada & Barbaro; Mistico vs. Ultimo Guerrero; Volador Jr. defends NWA welterweight title against Mephisto (traditionally the final match of the tour is a title match which is a high flying extravaganza).

This is the farewell tour for Tanaka, Komatsu and Dorada, who will all start with CMLL at the end of the month.

The tour is doing much better in ticket sales than a year ago, with most of the arenas sold out even before the cards were announced. The quality of the talent seems higher this year. Panther, the son of Blue Panther, is one of the best young wrestlers in CMLL. Fuego got over really well a couple of years ago. Hechicero is also one of the more underrated guys in CMLL. Lee is tremendous. Barbaro did well during the Best of the Super Juniors tournament. Volador Jr. is a featured star on these tours. Titan is spectacular. Stuka Jr. also did well in the past here, and Ultimo Guerrero and Mephisto are solid rudos, while Atlantis is CMLL's legend.

For the Tokyo Dome show:

1. Jado won the 18 man New Japan Rumble in 31:51. This match was terrible, but it was easy to watch because it was just all about who was going to enter. It was notable that a ton of regular roster guys like Yohei Komatsu, Jay White, Sho Tanaka, Juice Robinson, David Finlay and others you'd expect in this match just were at ringside and didn't wrestle on the show. This was more about comedy and nostalgia pops. The cameras would follow the guys as they did the long walk to the ring, so lots of guys were eliminated and it was never acknowledged by the announcers or you didn't see it. It opened with Jushin Liger against Yoshiaki Fujiwara, who, at 66, has one of the greatest faces. The one thing about Fujiwara is he only did a few things when he was young, and he can still do all of them now and make the mean faces and get over as a badass shooter. Tiger Mask was next in. After that came Cheeseburger. Nobody knew who he was, but by the next night in Korakuen Hall, everyone loved him. The guys in the match started playing tug-of-war with him. He would work with Fujiwara and really everyone worked with him like if he was Hollywood Stalker Ichikawa in Dragon Gate, in that they no show all his stuff and then pound on him and he would sell big. Hiro Saito (54) made a one-night return. Everyone was waiting for him to hit someone with a senton (he popularized that move in Japan in the early 80s), so he did it right away. Yoshi-Hashi was next in. After that came Mascara Dorada and Captain New Japan. Everyone jumped on Fujiwara and pinned him so he was the first guy eliminated. Manabu Nakanishi and Yuji Nagata were the next two in. Saito did a senton off the middle rope on Tiger Mask, and everyone jumped on Tiger Mask and pinned him. Saito picked up Cheeseburger, but everyone pushed Cheeseburger who fell on Saito and

everyone else jumped on the pile to pin Saito. Satoshi Kojima was next in. Liger and Nakanishi both went over the top rope together. Cheeseburger started doing the fast Kojima chops on Yoshi-Hashi. Hiroyoshi Tenzan was in. Tenzan clotheslined partner Kojima when Yoshi-Hashi moved and Kojima shoved Tenzan. They started trading chops. Then Kojima & Tenzan shook hands and attacked Yoshi-Hashi. Ryusuke Taguchi came in and started hip attacking. Nagata then started kicking Taguchi hard in the ass. Next in was Shiro Koshinaka (57), who was the first IWGP jr. heavyweight champion and was the guy whose trademark was the hip attack. Crowd popped big for him as a surprise. They didn't play his music on the PPV but his music was super over on the Tenryu show in November. Yoshi Tatsu, who was announcing, talked about how much he loved Koshinaka's music as a kid. He and Taguchi were hip attacking everyone. Next in was King Haku (56), to Bullet Club music (his son is Tama Tonga of the Bullet Club, and in a trivia note, when Haku first started in All Japan and Texas, his ring name was Tama Tonga). Haku actually started as a sumo in Japan while a teenager and has always been popular in Japan. Haku then eliminated Nagata and Kojima. Next in was the Great Kabuki (67), whose music and coming out doing the nunchakus got a great reaction. It also took him forever to get to the ring, and I think half the guys were eliminated by the time the cameras were back on the ring. Tenzan put Haku in the Anaconda Vise and Haku submitted. This came literally seconds after Tenzan put him in the hold and Matt Striker said how there's no way Haku would ever submit. Well, Gorilla Monsoon killing submissions on babyfaces was part of his childhood. Yoshi-Hashi & Taguchi then pinned Tenzan. Next in was Kazushi Sakuraba. He got the biggest reaction of anyone in the match. I think this reaction was all about his match with Shinya Aoki. I think fans knew that could kill him, because his whole gimmick in pro wrestling is as a shooter and he couldn't do a thing with a lightweight, so it was a combination of career appreciation and trying to show he was still over. Sakuraba and Kabuki squared off and the place went crazy. Kabuki immediately blew mist in Sakuraba's eyes and was disqualified. I didn't know there were DQ's in a Rumble. Taguchi then immediately pinned Sakuraba, who was only in the ring very briefly. Yoshi-hashii pinned Cheeseburger with a swanton, so he lasted 25 minutes in the match. The final entrant was Jado, who came out with pop star Momoka Arayasu of the band Momoiro Clover Z. She teased entering the match herself. A bunch of guys were gone and it came down to Taguchi, Koshinaka and Jado. Taguchi & Koshinaka double hip attacked Jado but Koshinaka for some reason wouldn't let Taguchi pin him, which made no sense. Then Koshinaka hip attacked Jado and went for the pin, but Taguchi broke it up. Taguchi used the hip attack on Koshinaka and Jado threw out Koshinaka. Taguchi was going crazy on Jado, but Jado pulled down the top rope as Taguchi charged and Taguchi flew over the top. Jado & Arayasu celebrated. Jado has a connection with her as they appear on some TV shows together, so his winning, which makes no sense because it builds nothing for New Japan (Nagata winning last year set up a Nakamura vs. Nagata IC title match), was really to get pub for Arayasu celebrating at the end. She then plugged the release of her new album in February. *

2. The Young Bucks regained the IWGP jr. tag titles beating champions Bobby Fish & Kyle O'Reilly, Matt Sydal & Ricochet and Rocky Romero & Trent Baretta in

16:42. The negative on this is this match got very little crowd reaction. It was a lot of casual fans and it was too many Americans in a match so they had no emotional attachment. This was

made this way to get everyone on the show because they are all so talented, but it would have been better to just do a tag match. Cody Hall came out with the Bucks. Matt came out, looked right at the camera and said “Four time junior champions” (they had held the title three times coming into this match) and winked. Hall and the Bucks attacked everyone before the match, starting a trend where this happened too often on the show. As for action itself, it was great, but this kind of match with guys in-and-out ends up just being spots. Baretta did a running flip dive over the top. Baretta did a ridiculously great DDT on Nick. Ricochet & Sydal did a double standing moonsault on Nick. Fish dove on everyone. O’Reilly had the armbar on someone on the ropes and Nick dove over both of them onto everyone on the floor and then superkicked O’Reilly to break it up. Romero used a plancha. Sydal did a moonsault off the top rope to the floor on everyone. Ricochet teased a dive but Hall tripped him. Matt distracted the ref and Hall picked up Ricochet and gave him the Razor’s edge over the top rope onto everyone. Notable Hall was using the Bad Luck Fall, which is Fale’s big move. Ricochet used a springboard shooting star on Hall and a springboard 450 on Nick. Ricochet & Sydal set up a double shooting star press on the Bucks, but Fish & O’Reilly broke it up. They started running wild. There was a four-on-four suplex spot where Romero & Baretta & Fish & O’Reilly all suplexed the Bucks & Sydal & Ricochet. Romero started clotheslining everyone. Romero did a tope on Fish & O’Reilly. Sydal used the infrared off the ropes on Baretta. Ricochet did the Benadryller on Baretta. Ricochet & Sydal went to the top for simultaneous shooting star presses on Romero & Baretta. The Bucks then pulled Ricochet & Sydal out of the ring. Matt tried to steal the pin on Romero, but he kicked out. The Bucks did More Bang for Your Buck on Romero for the pin. After the match, Nick gave a shout out to Kevin Owens, Neville and all their friends “at the fed.” If this match was in ROH or in the U.S., it would probably have been considered a match of the year, but it missed something here with the big crowd not that familiar with the personalities. ***3/4

3. Mark & Jay Briscoe & Toru Yano became the first Never open weight 6 man tag champions beating Bad Luck Fale & Tama Tonga & Yujiro Takahashi in 11:34.

It started with a brawl and Fale hitting Yano with a belt shot. Mark was the star of this match. He did the Mick Foley elbow flying off the apron on Takahashi, who came out with one of his strippers. Yano did a lot of comedy. Fale looked heavier than ever. Yano undid the turnbuckles and Fale ran into the exposed metal. Mark also used a blockbuster off the apron. Jay gave Tonga a Death Valley bomb for a near fall. Jay then put Tonga on his shoulders. Tonga was holding the top rope for dear life to avoid being thrown off. Yano then hit Tonga’s hands with a chair from outside the ring, causing him to let go. Mark climbed to the top and they gave Tonga the Doomsday device and Jay pinned him. **

4. Jay Lethal pinned Michael Elgin to retain the ROH title in 12:00. This is another match that would have gotten over a lot better in ROH, but was still good here. Elgin did the long vertical suplex where he put Lethal almost all the way down, then picked him back up, and at the end held Lethal up with one arm. Elgin also did a press overhead, and then pulled one of his arms so he was holding Lethal up with one arm. Truth Martini went for a book shot but Elgin knocked him down. Lethal then used a tope, and actually overshot Elgin and nearly impaled on the guard rail. Lethal then hit a second tope. Lethal then posed with Martini to

shoot a photo. Elgin used power moves like an overhead suplex, a hard slam, a press into a powerslam and a deadlift German suplex. Lethal used the Lethal combination and the Randy Savage elbow. He went for the Lethal injection but Elgin sidestepped him. He hit two German suplexes and a lariat and Lethal took a spin bump. Elgin used a power superplex into a falcon arrow for a near fall, followed by a power bomb into the turnbuckles. Martini came in to save. Elgin hit Martini with a spinning backfist and he dropped the book of truth. Lethal got it and as Elgin went to power bomb him, Lethal hit him with a book shot to the head and followed with the Lethal injection for the pin. ***1/4

5. Kushida beat Kenny Omega in 12:48 to win the IWGP jr. title. The Young Bucks came out with Omega with garbage cans and mops, because Omega is “The Cleaner.” Kushida came out with Taguchi, who was dressed up as Doc Brown from “Back to the Future,” which is part of Kushida & Alex Shelley’s gimmick as the Time Splitters. The Bucks double superkicked Doc Brown and Omega spit on him. Kushida cleaned house until Omega sprayed stuff in Kushida’s face. Omega then sprayed the stuff down his trunks and started selling. Nick hit Kushida with a garbage can. Omega then did a moonsault off the guard rail while holding a garbage can onto Kushida. The Bucks started playing on a garbage can the theme from “Back to the Future.” Omega did a fantastic running flip dive over the top on Kushida and started choking him with tape. Kushida used a springboard elbow and went for the hoverboard lock but Omega made the ropes. Kushida used a somersault kick and a flip dive off the top rope to the floor. Kushida did a moonsault and went for an armbar but Omega slipped out. Kushida worked on the left arm. Omega hit a German suplex but Kushida went back to the hoverboard lock. The Bucks were trying to pull Omega to the ropes. Taguchi at this point revived, and as Doc Brown, he hit both Bucks with garbage can shots. Omega used a one arm power bomb for a near fall. Omega did a jumping knee and a running knee to the side of the head. He had Kushida up for the one winged angel, but Kushida used a front rolling cradle and got the pin. Excellent match.

6. Togi Makabe & Tomoaki Honma beat Doc Gallows & Karl Anderson to win the IWGP tag titles in 12:49. Amber Gallows came out with her husband. They noted she was the new NWA women’s champion. Great match. The crowd was into it because Makabe & Honma are two of the best known mainstream guys in the promotion because they do talk shows as comedy figures. Gallows was bleeding from the mouth. Honma of course got worked over for several minutes. They set up the Magic killer, but Makabe broke it up to save Honma. Honma did a head-butt spear and went to the top. Gallows pushed him off. Anderson used a running power bomb on Honma for a near fall. Honma twice blocked the gun stun and used a head-butt to the chin. Makabe hot tagged in. Gallows used the Gallows pole (tree slam) for a near fall. Makabe started clotheslining them. Makabe & Honma did the kokeshi impact, which is Makabe with Anderson on his shoulders and Honma coming off the top rope with a head-butt spear. Honma then slammed Gallows, did a diving head-butt on him and Makabe followed with the King Kong kneedrop for the pin. Well timed great match. ***3/4

7. Hirooki Goto pinned Tetsuya Naito in 12:16. Evil and Bushi came out with Naito. They all attacked Goto before the bell. Evil whipped Goto into the barricade. Bushi attacked Captain

New Japan at ringside. Evil put a chair around Goto's neck and hit the chair with another chair. Naito gave Goto a neckbreaker off the apron through a table on the floor. Lots of good fast action. Naito used an infrared off the top rope for a near fall. He also used a Frankensteiner off the top for a near fall. There was a ref bump. Naito went for a low blow but Goto blocked it. Goto clotheslined the hell out of Naito. He set up the shouten kai, but Evil and Bushi interfered. Bushi went to blow mist at Goto, who moved and the mist hit Evil. Goto then gave Bushi a neckbreaker over the knee. Naito then hit Goto with a low blow and running cradle for a great near fall. Goto kicked out, hit a head-butt and got the pin clean with the shouten kai, which was clearly done to set him up for an IWGP title match. The interference was getting old by this point, but this was a really good match. ***3/4

8. Katsuyori Shibata pinned Tomohiro Ishii in 17:19 to win the Never Open weight title. This was Shibata and Ishii just beating the hell out of each other. They were getting out of the way of each others' big moves early. There was a spot where Ishii kicked Shibata in the back. Then Ishii sat down and dared Shibata to kick him as hard as he could in the back. This went back and forth. It was worse on Ishii because Shibata kicks a lot harder. Then they traded chops. Then they traded elbows. Shibata was killing him with elbows and a running kick, then went for a submission with an abdominal stretch and then an octopus. Shibata went for an armbar, a triangle, another armbar and a belly down armbar, but Ishii made the ropes. They traded clotheslines and kicks until both were wobbly. They traded German suplexes. There was a spot where both collapsed. Ishii used a missile dropkick to the back. Ishii started hitting sick clotheslines. Shibata went for a guillotine but Ishii powered out. Ishii tried a penalty kick but Shibata clotheslined him. Shibata used a Death Valley bomb for a near fall. Shibata used a choke. He went for a penalty kick, but Ishii caught the leg and head-butted him. Then they did a spot where they did these klunking absolutely sick and completely stupid head-butts to each other. There was no need to risk that kind of concussion for what was already an incredible match. Shibata hit a dropkick out of nowhere. Ishii did a sick clothesline for a near fall and another one. Shibata used a spinning back chop, but Ishii did an enzuigiri. But Shibata came back with a penalty kick and got the three count. . Aside from the spots where they sat down and let the other guy kick them as hard as they could, this felt like an intense fight from start to finish. ****1/2

9. Shinsuke Nakamura pinned A.J. Styles in 24:18 to retain the IC title. The place popped big when this match was put on the video wall. Can't say enough about this match, as it'll be one of the best of this year. Styles faked a back injury, then got up and nailed Nakamura as he'd backed off. Styles used the Mutalock and Stinger splash. Nakamura drove Styles back into the guard rail and used kicks to the body and an enzuigiri, and a face first suplex. Nakamura did a running knee to the back. Styles used a springboard elbow. He went for a suplex, but sold like his back was out. Styles then suplexed him on the turnbuckles and went for the calf killer. Nakamura countered into an armbar, which was great. Styles got out of that with an elbow to the mouth. Nakamura hit a bom a ye off the middle rope. The two traded hard elbows and Styles used a pancake for a near fall. Styles used the KENTA series. They went back and forth with strikes until Styles barely hit the Pele kick. Nakamura came back with a bom a ye

for a near fall. Styles hit Nakamura with a bom a ye and followed with a 450 splash, but Nakamura kicked out. Styles went for a spinning back chop but Nakamura jumped in the air and grabbed a flying armbar. He followed with a triangle. Styles used a one arm Styles clash but Nakamura kicked out. Styles hit the Bloody Sunday DDT and went for the Styles clash, but Nakamura blocked it. Styles kicked him in the head and set up a Styles clash off the top rope, but Nakamura escaped and kicked him in the head. Nakamura used a falcon arrow off the top rope for a near fall. Nakamura used a bom a ye to the back of the head, followed by another bom a ye, and got the pin. Styles probably wasn't close to 100 percent, but he wrestled like he was for the most part. He was a lot healthier here, or at least moved like it, compared with the Jay Lethal match a few weeks ago. After the match, Nakamura offered his fist and Styles gave him a fist bump back. ****3/4

10. Kazuchika Okada pinned Hiroshi Tanahashi in 36:01 to win the IWGP

heavyweight title. This was a classic on par with the Tanahashi vs. Nakamura G-1 final match. The first big spot was Tanahashi doing a chop block on Okada's right knee. Usually you work the left knee, but Tanahashi was working on both knees. They did a lot of stuff early where they'd evade the others' trademark spot with the idea they each knew the others' big moves ahead of time. Tanahashi did a high fly flow but Okada rolled through and picked him up for a tombstone piledriver, but Tanahashi escaped. Tanahashi tried to put Okada into the turnbuckles, but Okada blocked it and dropkicked Tanahashi off the apron and Tanahashi flipped and landed on his back. Okada kicked him over the barricade and then did a running crossbody over the barricade onto Tanahashi. That's the move Tanahashi did to Okada in previous matches. Tanahashi missed a middle rope senton and Okada DDT'd him on his head. Okada sidestepped a dropkick to the knee while Tanahashi moved out of the way of a senton. Tanahashi escaped a flapjack, so this was more escaping the big moves. Tanahashi went back to working both legs. He did a dragon screw on the right leg around the ropes and a sling blade on the apron. Tanahashi followed with a high fly flow off the top rope to the floor. Okada barely beat the 20 count. It was a great spot, as he teased getting in, and then suddenly collapsed like his legs gave out, and struggled to get in at 19. Tanahashi did a high fly flow off the middle rope to both of Okada's knees. He went for a Texas cloverleaf but Okada struggled to the ropes. Okada came back and used the neckbreaker over the knee, but injured his knee again in the process. Okada did four low dropkicks and then a missile dropkick two-thirds of the way across the ring. He followed with the Randy Savage elbow halfway across the ring. He set up the rainmaker, but Tanahashi ducked. Okada went for a tombstone but Tanahashi turned it into a front rolling cradle for a near fall. Tanahashi went back to working the knees. Okada went for a dropkick but Tanahashi caught his legs, used another dragon screw and went back to the Texas cloverleaf. Okada again got to the ropes. Tanahashi hit the sling blade but missed the high fly flow. Okada tried a tombstone but again Tanahashi escaped. Tanahashi tried a neckbreaker but Okada blocked it and finally hit the tombstone, and hit the rainmaker, and Tanahashi kicked out. Matt Striker then said how this match is not going to end with somebody doing their trademark move. Not sure that it's smart to take heat off the future big moves, not to mention it did end with a trademark move. Okada then did a high fly flow halfway across the ring for a near fall. Okada went for the rainmaker, but Tanahashi ducked and hit Okada with a rainmaker

for a near fall. Tanahashi went back to kicking the right knee and thigh. Okada tried a tombstone, but Tanahashi got out and hit the sling blade, followed by a dragon suplex for a near fall. Tanahashi did a high fly flow to the back, and another high fly flow to the chest, but Okada kicked out. Tanahashi went back up for another high fly flow, but Okada got up and dropkicked Tanahashi as he came off the top rope. Okada went for a German suplex but Tanahashi slapped him. Okada then hit a dropkick. Okada used a German suplex and went for the rainmaker. Tanahashi ducked and slapped him in the face. But Okada maintained wrist control and hit the rainmaker, held onto Tanahashi's wrist and hit a second rainmaker, and still held on and hit a third one for the pin. Tanahashi was helped to the back, completely beaten, while Okada and Gedo cut a promo to close the show as Okada finally was the end of the show star at the biggest event of the year. *****

JANUARY 4, 2017

Kenny Omega and Kazuchika Okada may have put on the greatest match in pro wrestling history in the main event of Wrestle Kingdom 11 on 1/4 at the Tokyo Dome.

The 46:45 classic, coming at the end of a show that lasted five hours and 40 minutes, set New Japan's all-time record for live foreign streaming viewers, peaking at about 7:30 a.m. Eastern time. A Jim Ross/Josh Barnett commentated version of the match will air on 1/13 on AXS TV, which very well could be the best one hour pro wrestling television show ever, given one match shows (Jack Brisco vs. Dory Funk Jr. from CWF in 1972; Ric Flair vs. Kerry Von Erich in Dallas; Flair vs. Von Erich in Honolulu; Flair vs. Barry Windham in Fayetteville; Midnight Express vs. Fantastics in Chattanooga; Tanahashi vs. Okada from 2013; Tanahashi vs. Styles from 2015) have been among the best and as great as the aforementioned matches were, this had most of the elements that all of those matches had, but elements they didn't and really combined the elements they did better.

Okada retained the IWGP heavyweight title after a spinning jumping tombstone piledriver and a fourth rainmaker, featured nearly every element of a classic match, from intensity, crowd heat, tremendous psychology, off the charts athleticism, hard hitting, timing, innovation and high risk and dangerous moves. The keys to the story is that Omega never once got to hit his one winged angel finisher, and even in defeat, came out of the show being almost clearly the best big match wrestler on the planet.

While watching the show, it felt like the time and place to do the title change, but the argument was it was too early in the Okada reign. Still, based on the performance, and the performance of Omega in the build to the show, by all rights Omega should win the championship at some point this year. Part of it is that if they are going to expand internationally, Omega is the best face of the company because he can talk different languages, is ridiculously good athletically and has so much charisma at this point. But losing this way was almost better, because it'll mean more when he wins it, particularly if it's in June in Osaka, which will be a hot crowd and right before the U.S. push.

Another key is his future because watching him, if I'm WWE, I'd not just want him, but he could

be that elusive special star that they've been unable to make. There is the issue that he can't wrestle matches like this nightly, or even monthly, without having a short life span on his career. But he's got the presence, charisma, cockiness and acting ability, as well as the look that WWE is afraid to push someone who doesn't have. Plus with the world a smaller place and mainstream sports web sites giving Omega U.S. media exposure, he'll walk in with a hardcore base he could build from. Plus, he's turned into a tremendous promo, although he's got the huge advantage of being able to use his own voice and use reality for his promos, like he did to build the Okada match.

Then again, from a WWE standpoint, having him have a couple of years as the face of New Japan, it'll only elevate him and he'd be able to walk in like A.J. Styles did this past year.

New Japan announced several of its major shows for the first eight months of the year, which includes dates on 7/1 and 7/2 at the Long Beach, CA, Convention Center. These are not G-1 Climax tournament shows, but are being called G-1 special shows. The G-1 Climax tournament was announced as starting on 7/17 in Sapporo, and finishing with three straight nights at Sumo Hall on 8/11, 8/12 and 8/13.

After the Fantastica Mania tour from 1/13 to 1/22 (with shows on 1/20, 1/21 and 1/22 at Korakuen Hall, all on New Japan World), there will be PPV shows on 2/5 as The New Beginning in Sapporo, 2/11 as The New Beginning in Osaka at the Edion Arena, the 45th anniversary show on 3/6 at the Ota Ward Gym in Tokyo, and the New Japan Cup tournament in March with the finals on 3/20 in Niigata.

The former Invasion Attack show, now called Sakura Genesis, takes place on 4/9 at Tokyo Sumo Hall. Wrestling Dontaku once again takes place on 5/3 at the Fukuoka International Center Arena. The Best of the Super Junior finals will be on 6/3 at the Yoyogi Gym in Tokyo. Dominion, which is traditionally the biggest show between the Tokyo Dome and G-1 finals, will be on 6/11 at the Osaka Jo Hall.

Okada will likely defend his title in Sapporo or Osaka. The winner of the New Japan Cup single elimination tournament will get the title shot at Sakura Genesis. It's possible for Omega to win the tournament and get the shot, but from a timing standpoint, I'd do the rematch at Dominion.

A number of people after the match stated that it was the greatest match they'd ever seen. Personally, I'd say the same thing. As people were leaving the Tokyo Dome the murmur in the crowd was that it was the greatest pro wrestling match ever, and at restaurants in the area after the show, and on the subway, that was the main topic of conversation. The talk backstage was also that it was the greatest match anyone had ever seen.

The match didn't rely on crazy moves, and more relied on psychology, but had the few memorable spots built up that would be remembered. Omega did a moonsault off the top rope and cleared the barricade on Okada, in the position the Japanese announcers would have been in, but they moved themselves and their tables away. Omega took an insane high backdrop over the top rope and through a table on the floor. The scariest spot, and one I hope doesn't get copied, saw Omega do a top rope dragon superplex. Okada landed off the top rope almost on

the top of his head. While he seemed fine, announcer Steve Corino noted that when, not if, Okada has neck fusion surgery, he'll always remember that spot. The 90s All Japan stars, as great as they were, should be the example of why taking suplexes at high angles nearly on top of your head should be avoided at all costs, and this wasn't just a suplex but it was being nearly spiked falling backwards at a high angle off the top rope.

The Dome show drew 26,192 paid and there was in the neighborhood of 35,000 to 37,000 in the building. It was well up as far as total in the building from last year, although paid was only up about 1,100. Still, that is considered a major success because it's the first time since 2010 that Hiroshi Tanahashi wasn't in the Tokyo Dome main event, and Omega was unproven as far as headlining a show of this caliber. Going in, the crowd saw Okada vs. Omega as that epic championship match, and both came out of it having transformed from two of the best wrestlers in the industry to bonafide big card draws.

Because of the huge merchandise business, this was likely the most successful Dome show dating back more than a decade. It also had, by far, the most foreigners in attendance, stemming from New Japan World, the Internet in general, and the English language television show on AXS.

Still, the huge merchandise business was based more on the LIJ stable, headed by Tetsuya Naito, who retained his IC title over Tanahashi in the No. 2 bout, a match that would be being talked about as a potential 2017 match of the year under normal circumstances.

The titles being retained in the top matches came after six straight title changes underneath.

It started with Rocky Romero & Baretta winning the IWGP jr. tag team titles over The Young Bucks. Next was a gauntlet series that ended with the LIJ team of Seiya Sanada & Evil & Bushi winning the Never Open weight trios titles from Satoshi Kojima & Ricochet & David Finlay. That followed with Adam Cole winning the ROH title from Kyle O'Reilly, which had major significance.

Next saw the returning Toru Yano & Tomohiro Ishii win the IWGP heavyweight tag team titles in a three-way over Tama Tonga & Tanga Roa, the champions, and the 2016 New Japan Tag League winners, Togi Makabe & Tomoaki Honma.

That was followed by two classic matches, where Hiromu Takahashi (Kamaitachi) won the IWGP jr. title from Kushida, which looks to set the division up for a golden era starting this year with a big four of Kushida, Takahashi, Ricochet and Will Ospreay and people like Dragon Lee and Volador Jr. Takahashi in many ways, the style is different but significance, reminds me of 1981 Dynamite Kid. Both were great but that both had that extra bit of charisma that made them stand out above the others of their era. Really, Takahashi has more personality than Dynamite, and unfortunately, is just as nuts in the sense he's so reckless with his body that he's likely to burn out. And he's so good and charismatic he doesn't have to be reckless. When he came down the ramp, the crowd took to him like a superstar, which is very difficult for someone who doesn't have a long tenure of being a big name. It's also the kind of a guy needed to take Kushida from being a great worker to being a special champion, as the era legends of the

division, like Danny Hodge, Tiger Mask and Jushin Liger all had to not only stand out, but have the rivalries. As great as Kushida is, he doesn't have the charisma of a Sayama or a Liger, and needs the opponents and the great matches to be seen as something special. Takahashi can be that legendary rival, and the other opponents are so strong that these guys may be able to have a juniors steal the show era like the period when Liger, Chris Benoit, Shinjiro Otani, Great Sasuke, Ultimo Dragon and Eddy Guerrero were in their primes in the mid-90s.

The final title change was the battle of high school best friends and wrestling teammates, and roommates, who started together in pro wrestling, where Hirooki Goto won the Never open weight title from Katsuyori Shibata.

The Cole vs. O'Reilly finish was the most significant from a U.S. standpoint. It was well known going in that O'Reilly would retain if he signed a new deal. The loss means he decided against signing, which was still up in the air until this past week. WWE has real interest in him. With Bobby Fish staying with ROH and New Japan, it breaks up their tag team. O'Reilly was one of the best Americans at working in Japan because of his MMA-based style and ability to adapt it to have great pro wrestling matches, and was a particular favorite of New Japan owner Takaaki Kidani. He'd have been a key player in what is expected to be a junior heavyweight boom year in Japan, or even as a heavyweight, since his style would work well with the Tanahashi, Naito, Goto, Shibata and Okada headliners.

Really, the first few hours of the show, while good, were hardly off the charts. But few shows in history have had the quality of four matches in a row like the last four on this card.

The angles to kick off 2017 and set up the big shows in February were to be shot at New Year's Dash on 1/5 at Korakuen Hall.

1. Michael Elgin won the New Japan Rumble in 25:13. This is the annual Rumble event which is done mostly for light comedy as the fans are getting into the building. The idea is to use the wrestlers in the promotion not booked in other matches, and fill it up with surprises and stars from the past. There were no real Japanese superstars like the Great Kabuki, Shiro Koshinaka and Yoshiaki Fujiwara types from the past, although Hiro Saito was back and Kuniaki Kobayashi got a nice pop for his cameo. The big surprises were Billy Gunn and Scott Norton. Norton was one of the biggest stars in New Japan in the 90s, and at 56 years old, was still as big as a house and looked pretty much the same as he did 20 years ago. Elgin and Gunn opened and did the spots where they'd run into each other and not budge. Bone Soldier was next in and the whole place groaned. Next came Cheeseburger from ROH, who got a nice reaction. Soldier was the first person eliminated at 3:50 when Cheeseburger ducked a charge and Soldier went over the top rope. Jushin Liger was in next, to a big pop. Elgin clotheslined Gunn over the top at 5:45. Kobayashi, who turns 61 this week, came out to a big pop. He was one of the big three rivals of the original Tiger Mask during the first junior heavyweight boom (with Rollerball Rocco as Black Tiger and Dynamite Kid). He was also Liger's first-ever opponent under the gimmick, and that was on the first pro wrestling show ever at the Tokyo Dome. Plus he had a match of the year in the 80s with Mitsuharu Misawa and few remember it, but he also held the Americas title in California. The people popped when he used the

fisherman suplex, which is the move he invented. Tiger Mask was next in, with the symbolic Tiger Mask vs. Kobayashi spot, including a terrible looking spin kick by Kobayashi. At 8:59, Tiger Mask pinned Kobayashi with a crucifix. Manabu Nakanishi was in next. He immediately speared Elgin and did his slow as molasses clotheslines on everyone. Ryusuke Taguchi was next in. Elgin splashed onto Nakanishi and five guys jumped on top for the pin in 11:59. Liger used La Tapatia, the Rito Romero special, on Taguchi and Tiger Mask crawled on Liger to pin him in 12:35. Taguchi then gave Tiger Mask a hip attack and the eliminated Liger helped pin him in 12:46. Yoshitatsu and Yuji Nagata were the next two in. Nagata used the Nagata armlock on Taguchi, but Yoshitatsu saved. The crowd booed Yoshitatsu something fierce for that. Nagata and Yoshitatsu then did the most serious and stiffest work so far. Yoshitatsu tried a pedigree, but Nagata backdropped his way out. Hiroyoshi Tenzan was next in. Everyone jumped on Yoshitatsu and pinned him in the old pileup spot at 16:26. Hiro Saito, who is 55, was next in. He's lost a ton of weight since last year. He was the guy who got the senton move over in Japan in the 80s so really the whole idea is have him come in and do a senton. He did one on Nagata, and Tenzan and Saito both pinned Nagata in 19:20. Scott Norton was next in. He played the old powerhouse, not moving when people attacked him. Norton power bombed and pinned Taguchi in 21:01. Norton pinned Saito in 22:23 after a clothesline. Elgin then backdropped Norton over the top in 22:36. People were pretty into the idea of Elgin vs. Norton. This left Tenzan, Elgin and Cheeseburger as the last three. Elgin clotheslined Tenzan over the top in 23:37. Elgin and Cheeseburger were the last two and everyone knew how this was ending. Elgin killed him with forearms, but Cheeseburger got a comeback with a superkick and a guillotine. Elgin won by power bombing him into the turnbuckles and giving him an Elgin bomb at 25:13. Elgin issued a challenge to Naito for the IC title after the show. Elgin's legit orbital bone injury that required surgery came in a match with Naito, so that program makes sense right now. *

2. Tiger Mask W (Kota Ibushi) beat Tiger the Dark (ACH) in 6:34. They didn't get much time to build the match but it was athletically great. Tiger the Dark is one of the lead heels of the Tiger Mask cartoon on TV-Asahi. TTD did a Fosbury Flop dive. TMW did the usual Ibushi running moonsault off the top rope to the floor. Both reversed a tombstone piledriver until TTD planted him for a near fall. TMW won, of course, with a fast German suplex, a Tiger suplex and a last ride power bomb. If this was anywhere but the Tokyo Dome as an opener, and on any other show, people would be raving about it. But the crowd is slow to build, it was short and people popped for moves but not the match. So Kota Ibushi was in what many considered the worst match on the show, even though it would be great anywhere else. ***

3. Rocky Romero & Baretta beat Young Bucks to win the IWGP jr. tag titles in 12:57. This had a lot more heat than I expected since the early matches rarely do. The Bucks came out with four sets of tag team title belts, the IWGP Jr. belts, the ROH belts, the PWG belts and their own Superkick party belts. There was a cool early count out tease. The Bucks left the ring and were near the back. Romero & Baretta chased them down but both got superkicked. The Bucks ran to the ring to leave them to get counted out. Romero & Baretta had a long way to go, and kept stumbling, but just got in at 19 1/2. Romero did a tope on Nick. Baretta did a torture rack on Matt and Romero came off the top rope with a knee for a near fall. Baretta went for the

Omori driver but Nick dropkicked him and Matt turned it into a Canadian Destroyer. Baretta did a running dive over the top and the Bucks left and he crashed hard on the floor. From that point on, it was Romero on his own against both. They destroyed Romero including an elevated 450, and a million superkicks. When they set up More Bang for Your Guck, Romero pinned Matt out of nowhere with a backslide. The story was that Romero & Baretta had been teasing splitting for months and always losing the big one, but scored the upset here. ***1/2

4. In the first match of the trios gauntlet, Yujiro Takahashi & Bad Luck Fale & Chase Owens (Bullet Club) beat Will Ospreay & Yoshi-Hashi & Jado (Chaos) in 7:30. Ospreay was the star of the match doing a triple moonsault spot and also doing a space flying tiger drop. Page did a shooting star press off the apron on Ospreay. Takahashi pinned Jado with a DDT to advance. ***

5. Seiya Sanada & Evil & Bushi (LIJ) beat Yujiro Takahashi & Bad Luck Fale & Chase Owens in 2:06. The finish saw Sanada put a chair around Takahashi's neck and Evil swing another chair like a baseball bat at the chair around the neck. The chair around his neck went flying and actually hit one of the ring attendants in the head by accident. Sanada then put the skull end (dragon sleeper) on Takahashi for the submission. *

6. Seiya Sanada & Evil & Bushi beat Never Open weight tag champs Satoshi Kojima & Ricochet & David Finlay in 6:30. Ricochet and Finlay opened with a double flip dive. Ricochet did just a phenomenal series of flying moves one after the other. Kojima did his hard chops in the corner. Evil threw Ricochet in the air and Bushi used a codebreaker on him. Kojima hit the diamond cutter on Evil and then the lariat, but Sanada made the save. The finish saw the referee distracted and Bushi blew mist in Kojima's eyes and Evil used a power bomb and then got the pin on Kojima after the STO. ***1/4

7. Cody the American Nightmare pinned Juice Robinson in 9:37. This is another one that would have been considered really good on any other show, but it was just something on the show here. Cody used a springboard plancha, but Robinson caught him as he landed and gave him an overhead belly-to-belly on the floor. There was a botched codebreaker spot by Robinson. Cody used a chop block and an Indian deathlock in the middle of the ring, but Robinson made the ropes. Cody had worked over the knee and when Robinson tried a power bomb, his knee went out. The finish saw Cody block the killswitch and hit the crossroads for the pin. **3/4

8. Adam Cole beat Kyle O'Reilly to regain the ROH title in 10:14. Todd Sinclair from ROH was brought in to referee. Cole spit in O'Reilly's face. O'Reilly got the armbar right away but Cole made the ropes. Cole attacked O'Reilly's injured shoulder with a chair shot. This was a very physical and really good match. Because it was the second straight match with two Americans, the crowd wasn't as into it as much as some of the other matches. But for match quality as far as solid believable hard hitting action, it was the best thing up to this point on the show. At one point both kept punching and kicking each other and they both went down at the same time. O'Reilly went for another armbar but Cole broke it with stomps to the head. Cole got near falls with a jumping knee and shining wizard. He went for a superkick, but O'Reilly caught

it and did the ankle lock. Cole got out and hit four superkicks and the last shot for the pin. ***1/2

9. Toru Yano & Tomohiro Ishii won the IWGP heavyweight tag team titles over champions Tama Tonga & Tanga Roa and New Japan Cup winners Togi Makabe & Tomoaki Honma in 12:24. The match story is that Yano stole the tournament trophies from Makabe & Honma, and then stole the tag title belts from Tonga & Roa a week later. So he came out with the trophies and belts. Lots of swearing here by Makabe & Roa. Another hard physical match. Tonga looked really good with his unique style. Ishii was great when he was in. Yano is pure comedy with the taking the padding off the corner and throwing Honma's back into the exposed steel and working over the back. Great action with Ishii vs. Honma. Tonga did a gun stun off the ropes on Honma that hurt my neck just watching it. Tonga & Roa hit the Guerrilla Warfare on Honma, but he wasn't the legal man. Great finish. Yano blind tagged in. Tonga & Roa went to double suplex Ishii, but Yano gave them both a low blow. Ishii then clotheslined Roa and Yano schoolboyed him for the pin. ***1/2

10. Hiromu Takahashi won the IWGP jr. title from Kushida in 16:15. Takahashi got a total superstar reaction, which was impressive given he's had almost no television. Kushida gave him a kopppo kick while Takahashi was on the top rope, and followed with a flip plancha to the floor in the first move of the match. Takahashi did a sunset flip power bomb off the apron to the floor. I hate that spot. Kushida took it hard on the back of his head on the floor. They had the doctors check on him and Kushida was selling like he may have had a concussion (it was the sell) and Takahashi worked over the back of his head. Kushida did a great sell job here. Takahashi did a rolling German suplex with the idea he twice dropped Kushida again on the back of his head. The one botched spot was Takahashi flying off the top rope to give Kushida a huracanrana that was supposed to send him over the top rope to the floor. But Kushida didn't get over the ropes. Takahashi threw him out and then did the senton off the top rope to the floor, and almost missed and connected with more of a clothesline than his back. Takahashi did the double knees off the top rope for a near fall. He tried another sunset flip power bomb out of the ring but Kushida in going over, flipped and landed on his feet. Takahashi ran off the apron with a dive but Kushida caught him on the floor with an armbar in a great spot. Kushida started working the arm and went for the hoverboard lock. Kushida was excellent here. Both guys threw one punch and sold the punch big. Takahashi did an overhead belly to belly into the turnbuckles. Kushida was on the top rope working for a hoverboard lock, but Takahashi escaped, used a reverse huracanrana power bomb combination off the ropes and a spinning power bomb for the pin. ****1/2

11. Hirooki Goto pinned Katsuyori Shibata in 16:17 to win the Never Open weight title. The crowd was really hot for Shibata, far more than Goto. Shibata is working with shoulder, neck and knee injuries. These guys worked the really stiff elbows, kicks and forearms. Just an awesome match. Goto used a Saito suplex and elbow off the top rope. At one point Shibata sat there and dared Goto to kick him as hard as he could in the chest and just took it. Shibata got the choke but Goto made the ropes. Shibata got the choke again in the middle, tied up Goto's arms so he couldn't grab the ropes and put a body scissors on as well so he couldn't break the choke. Goto still managed to roll and get his foot on the ropes. Goto hit two head-

butts but Shibata used the penalty kick. Both went down selling. Goto used the ushigoroshi and the shoten kai for near falls. They traded elbows and head-butts. The last few minutes of this match were incredible. Goto finally won clean with a clothesline to the back of the head and the GTR. ****1/2

12. Tetsuya Naito pinned Hiroshi Tanahashi to retain the IC title in 25:25.

Tanahashi came out to his new “Ace” music. I was told it flopped live. He still got a superstar reaction but it did feel empty without his trademark “High Energy” song. Ken Yasuda (a famous Japanese actor, not to be confused with the bodybuilder who WWE tried to use 15 years ago) was the guest ring announcer. The crowd was split, but they booed Tanahashi early when he threw body punches on the break. Both men spent the match working on the other’s knees. Naito spit on him twice. Tanahashi did a sling blade on the apron and a high fly flow to the floor. Naito did a huracanrana off the top rope and went right into a German suplex. He also did a enzuigiri, flying forearm and sidewalk bomb. Naito used a kneelock that Tanahashi reversed into the Texas cloverleaf. Tanahashi did two more sling blades and a crossbody off the top. Tanahashi went for the high fly flow, but missed. Naito went for Destino, but Tanahashi blocked it and used the twist and shout (yes, named after the Beatles song). They were trading elbows and the crowd was going nuts. Then they were trading kicks to the knee until Tanahashi hit a dragon suplex. Tanahashi hit a high fly flow to the back and went for the regular high fly flow, but Naito got his knees up. The story was that Naito’s knees had been worked on, so now both guys were messed up and selling big. Naito hit the Destino coming off the ropes, but Tanahashi kicked out. He hit a second one and got the pin. After the match, Naito again threw the belt in the air and let it crash on the mat. The psychology here was tremendous and it was very different from the prior two matches but all were great in different ways at the same level.

***1/2

13. Kazuchika Okada pinned Kenny Omega in 46:45 to retain the IWGP

heavyweight title. There was a great video feature on Omega before the match. The match videos made this feel like the biggest match of the year. The match started slow, but it had to given how long it was going and what it was following. They opened with Omega doing the bridge and backslide spot that Flair used to do in his classic matches. Okada did a draping DDT off the barricade. Okada did a sprint on the floor and dove over the barricade with a crossbody. Omega did a Frankensteiner out of nowhere for a near fall. Omega did a running flip dive over the top while the Young Bucks played the theme from “Terminator.” Omega did this ridiculous missile dropkick to the back of the head that looked like it nearly kicked Okada’s head off his shoulders. I have no idea how Okada’s neck could be in decent shape after this match. Omega worked over the neck with the camel clutch. Okada came back working on Omega’s neck with the ref ink and the neckbreaker over the knee. Okada came off the top with the Randy Savage elbow but Omega got his knees up. Omega used a backbreaker and a sliding dropkick to knock Okada over the guard rail. Okada motioned for the announcers to move the tables out of the way and cleared things out. Omega then did a moonsault off the top rope to the floor, over the guard rail onto Okada in the first of the memorable spots. Omega followed with a run along with apron into a double foot stomp onto a table that Okada was underneath. Omega got near

falls after two power bombs. Okada was selling great and the crowd started strongly getting behind him. Omega used a middle rope moonsault for a near fall. Okada's back was sliced up, probably from hitting a table when he flew over the barricade before the moonsault. Omega was on the top rope and Okada dropkicked him to the floor. Omega tried the one-winged angel off the apron through a table but Okada got away. Then came the second crazy spot, which was Okada's high backdrop where Omega flew over the top rope and crashed through the table. Don't try this at home. If he had landed just a foot to the left he could have been impaled. Okada hit a missile dropkick for a near fall and an elbow off the top rope. Omega kicked out and slapped Okada in the face. Then came the next crazy spot which was Omega's dragon superplex off the top rope. Omega continued to work on the neck with a neckbreaker over the knee. Okada used a high angle German suplex. He then finally hit the dropkick and the place exploded. The key here is that everyone knows in a long Okada match, that the dropkick means they are working toward the finish. But they went several minutes after it this time. Omega started doing the jumping knees and a reverse Frankensteiner. He did another running knee. Omega again went for the one-winged angel but Okada not only got out of it, but landed on his feet. Okada used a tombstone piledriver and the rainmaker, but Omega kicked out. Okada used a running dropkick and went for another tombstone piledriver, but Omega reversed and did the tombstone to Okada. The two traded elbows until Omega did a fast dragon suplex and a series of running knees. He went for the one-winged angel again, but Okada was holding the wrist, got out and hit a desperation rainmaker. Omega recovered with kicks and knees over and over until Okada did another rainmaker. Both were selling. They got up and Omega hit a dropkick and a hard jumping knee. Omega went for the one-winged angel again, but Okada got out of it, used a jumping and spinning tombstone piledriver, and then a fourth rainmaker and finally got the pin. *****

JANUARY 4, 2018

Wrestle Kingdom 12, headlined by Kazuchika Okada's retaining the IWGP title over Tetsuya Naito and Kenny Omega beating Chris Jericho in a U.S. title match was the biggest non-WWE pro wrestling event on a worldwide basis since the collapse of WCW.

The 1/4 show at the Tokyo Dome kicked off the year with what is likely to be a strong candidate for best show of the year, just as Wrestle Kingdom had won the same award in 2015 and 2016, and was a favorite to make it three in a row in 2017.

Whether the wrestling was as good as the other years is debatable, but for a number of reasons, this show was far bigger, in both attendance, market value and overall interest.

The appearance of Jericho brought a new fan base that watched new Japan for the first time, either on New Japan World, AXS TV or through other means. It wasn't just the idea that a WWE star was facing a New Japan star in the "Alpha vs. Omega" match, but the brilliance in which the angle played out. You could have a bigger WWE star like Roman Reigns, John Cena or Brock Lesnar face a New Japan star, and it's extremely doubtful they'd have drawn the same money just because the angles and storylines wouldn't have been as good. It wasn't WWE vs. New Japan that was the main draw, although it was an underlying theme. It was more a newly-

reinvented Jericho and the series of angles that built to the match, combined with Omega becoming such a strong underground draw in the U.S. It was also the work of serious hard promotion.

In many ways, it was a career climax for Jericho. He's been in tons of big shows before, headlining many PPVs in WWE. He was a key part of several WrestleManias and in the main event position in one, in 2002, with HHH, although the real main event on that show was Hulk Hogan vs. The Rock. Nevertheless, with the show billed as a double main event, Jericho did join only Ric Flair and Brock Lesnar as men who have headlined both a New Japan Tokyo Dome show (Hulk Hogan headlined an SWS show in that building and was on a few New Japan shows, but never in the main event) and a WrestleMania.

But while on the card in a good position, he was never like Dwayne Johnson or Donald Trump or even Shane McMahon, where you could show based on his match being announced, that he drew over and above WrestleMania. In reality, in a 27 year career, Jericho is well respected a top-notch wrestler and an even better promo. While he had a hot feud at one point with Shawn Michaels that boosted PPV numbers most likely, it's hard to really pinpoint them.

He came from an era where top guy means a guy who provably drew money, like Hogan, Flair, Roddy Piper, Randy Savage, Bruno Sammartino, The Rock or Steve Austin. In most of those cases, they were the result of a combination of talent and opportunity. In this case, Jericho created his own opportunity and really all four guys in the two main events, were part of a successful mix, and all played a part.

Okada vs. Naito was the real main event for Japan, while Omega vs. Jericho was the main event for the rest of the world. In the past, the latter moniker would be nice, but would mean nothing, since Wrestle Kingdom has been a Japanese event. But the world has gotten smaller between YouTube, social media, the Internet, streaming services and New Japan getting U.S. television.

Even though Wrestle Kingdom 9 was on PPV in the U.S., its audience was limited. Based on google searches in the U.S., this year's show had double the interest of last year's show over the full week, and last year's show had all the hoopla of the Omega vs. Okada match. It had nearly four times the interest of Wrestle Kingdom 9 and 10, even with all the promotion done for PPV of the former.

What's notable is also that outside of Japan, the U.S. was only the No. 6 market in terms of per capita interest, trailing the U.K., Ireland, Puerto Rico, Australia and Canada. Canada being No. 5 was also a surprise since with Winnipeg being where Jericho grew up and where Omega lives, Canada would have been expected to be No. 1. The most searched names, in order, were Jericho, Omega, Okada, Naito, Cody Rhodes, Marty Scurll, Will Ospreay and Masahito Kakihara. In the U.S., it was Omega and Jericho tied, followed by Okada, Naito, Cody, Scurll, Ospreay, Brandi Rhodes and Kakihara.

As far as the numbers, this is the pattern for New Japan World, which is similar but much smaller than WWE Network. Last year, WrestleKingdom 11 saw the numbers increase over the week from 45,000 to 60,000. After, it dropped back to about 50,000, so most of the increase

didn't hold. It jumped back to 70,000 for the G-1 finals and hovered at that level most of the rest of the year. It was at 65,000 in December and jumped to 70,000 on 1/3 in the U.S. It was up to 82,000 a few hours before the show started, and between the show and New Year's Dash the next day, it was at 95,000 after Dash ended and 97,000 by the next morning U.S. time. On the afternoon of 1/9, it had increased to 99,784, so it likely topped 100,000 by the end of that day. So the increase in subscribers last year for the show was 15,000 and this year was 35,000. It still pales compared to WWE numbers, but it's amazing growth. The key is of those 35,000 newcomers, how many continue through February? Most probably won't, but nobody was counting on most, just an increase from what was the previous long-term base.

In theory, it should have been slightly more difficult to grow this year than last because the service is a year older, but interest in New Japan is also up. It's probably unfair to credit Jericho vs. Omega with 20,000 new subs over and above what they'd have gotten, but 15,000 is not a stretch at all, and that's a \$128,000 value alone let alone if it adds 5,000 to the base it's worth another \$484,000 for the year.

The paid attendance was 34,995, and the total in the building was between 43,000 and 44,000. The building was set up for about 45,000 and was largely full. After winning the main event, Okada actually pointed to a few sections that weren't full and said that next year with him on top they would fill them. Takaaki Kidani said that the company goal was to build to where they could also fill the outfield seats, which were mostly blocked off by the stage.

Legitimately, it was the largest crowd for a New Japan show in 16 years, and for that matter, for any pro wrestling show that wasn't promoted by WWE since that time..

Last year's paid attendance was 26,192. My gut says they were going to do 30,000 this year with the increase in popularity and the Jericho vs. Omega match added about 5,000 fans. That could be a little high or low, but it's probably not far off. If you figure that's at a \$90 average ticket price and that the average fan is spending \$40 on merchandise (and my gut is the fans added by that match were spending more than that), you get \$650,000. Jericho had done interviews and talked about adding \$1 million in revenue to what they would have done in talking about provably drawing money, and I'd think about \$1.13 million would be a fair estimate. When Brock Lesnar came back to pro wrestling, he was able to consistently move business by \$750,000 on an average show, but it's a lot easier to do that with PPV than just live tickets and a streaming service.

Of those, more than 1,000 tickets were sold in the U.S., and many other Americans and Europeans got their tickets in Japan. The estimate was about 2,400 American and European fans at the show, a number which is totally unprecedented. When I went to sold out Tokyo Dome shows in the 90s, I doubt that figure would be more than about 200.

We got 1,405 responses over three days to our poll on the show, destroying the old record of 970 set for the WWE's ECW One Night Stand show in 2005 and more than doubling any show in the last ten years. For a comparison last year's three biggest shows when it came to our feedback were Dominion at 580, Wrestle Kingdom at 534 and WrestleMania at 523.

The next night, at New Year's Dash at Korakuen Hall, and later over ice cream at a restaurant after the show, they set up a series of angles for the next several months.

The key is that Jericho is coming back, as at the end of Dash, when the show appeared to be over and Naito was doing his closing promo, suddenly Jericho attacked him. The two had been going back-and-forth with Naito going off at a press conference about Jericho vs. Omega being billed as a co-main event, saying that all his life he'd worked to be in the Dome main event, that it was taken away from him in 2014 by the fans, and now he earned it and it was the one and only main event. Jericho pushed that they were the main event for Japan, but he and Omega were the main event in the rest of the world.

Because Jericho starts touring with his band "Fozzy" at the end of the month, the Jericho vs. Naito match would either take place on 3/25 in Long Beach (as he is between tours that week) or at Dominion on 6/9 in Osaka. Jericho didn't give specifics, although those close to the situation did say it's right now planned for Long Beach. But he did say he would be returning and would like to work a Brock Lesnar type of schedule. That's the right thing for him, as even an A.J. Styles type of schedule wouldn't make sense for either side. Plus his main priority for this year is Fozzy. He made it clear he's not interested in doing the G-1 tournament and he really shouldn't. Essentially he's looking for big matches, and obviously Omega, Naito, Okada and Hiroshi Tanahashi, the company's big four, would be the ones that make sense. Perhaps Bryan Danielson, if he starts here toward the end of the year, would make sense but I'm not sure would have the special quality of the others since it's been done. Really, he probably should have beaten Omega to set up a second meeting, as well as to set up a title shot at Okada.

While he's not like Lesnar, since Lesnar's gimmick was being real and legitimate and didn't have Jericho's angle, creative and promotional skills, Lesnar's drawing power is based on needing to win almost all his matches, Jericho doesn't have to, but he does need at least one win here and there to remain valuable at the top level and if he's not kept at that level, there's no point for either side. Really, he should beat Naito to set up a match with Okada, and after that there's still a second match with Omega and a first with Tanahashi.

But in a sense, a win over Omega at the Dome would tell people he was returning and I think he wanted the Naito attack to come at a time when people thought that he was one-and-done. The money figure he got for the Dome show, Dash and the build-up was said to be about the same as what he earned in his last six months combined with WWE. And it's really clear he loved the fact that he largely could lay out all his angles and his matches without needing to get everything, or really, barely anything approved. Jericho was friends with and former tag team partners with Gedo & Jado (they were in a trio of Gedo & Jado & Liondo) when all were starting out in the business in the early 90s with Genichiro Tenryu's WAR promotion. In many ways, it was three guys who were kids starting out, and now nearly a quarter century later, they're the bookers and he's an international star coming back to work for them.

As far as Omega goes, on 1/9, he signed his new contract so it is official he's with New Japan through January 31, 2019, so he won't be in the Royal Rumble this year (or next year), or WrestleMania, which no doubt won't keep people from speculating on his role in those shows.

daily.

As far as Okada's retaining the title, I would have gone with Naito. Naito was the most popular wrestler and biggest merchandise seller by far. Timing is everything and this was his time.

Okada had always been planned to win. The feeling is that for the general public, Okada is the company's superstar. When TV-Asahi did that national poll of the biggest wrestling star of all-time, Okada placed fourth, behind only Giant Baba, Antonio Inoki and Satoru Sayama, and one spot ahead of Rikidozan, since it's a generation later. The idea is to try and make Okada into the face of the company at the level Inoki was but nobody has ever been since.

This record-setting title reign is the one that they want people to point to for a decade like a major sports domination period ala Michael Jordan in the NBA, where he had one fantastic match after another and held the title longer than anyone.

He already broke Tanahashi's record for most time holding the IWGP title, but there are two records left. The first is most consecutive title defenses during one reign. Tanahashi's January 4, 2011 to February 12, 2012 reign (where he lost to the "unknown" Okada at the end) saw him make 11 successful defenses. While Okada has held the title longer, they are limiting his title defenses with the idea that the less often they happen, the more important they become.

The win over Naito was No. 9. He will be next facing Seiya Sanada on 2/10 in Osaka for No. 10. My presumption is he won't defend in Long Beach, although that is possible. More likely the record would be tied at Sakura Genesis on 4/1 at Sumo Hall in Tokyo. That would leave the record to be broken in May in Fukuoka, but it would be bigger to have that record broken at Dominion in June. There is the natural storyline of him tying the record and then facing Tanahashi to break the record, particularly since the two had a legendary rivalry. If that match takes place in May or June, the two won't have met in a singles match since their 30:00 draw in the 2016 G-1 tournament, or nearly two years earlier.

As far as the Dome show went, the match quality was excellent. There was no Omega vs. Okada match on the show, but most matches were great, and what made the six hour and 10 minute show so easy to watch is that every match was different. Omega vs. Naito was a classic world title match between an over champion and a legit top contender where people believed the title could change hands. Jericho vs. Omega was a brawl, with juice and a lot of good psychological spots, hard blows leaving knots on both guys, and strong athleticism. Some didn't like Tanahashi vs. Jay White for different reasons. Some felt White should have won, but that's just not the way it's done in Japan (Okada's 2012 win over Tanahashi being the exception). Tanahashi's knee was messed up but he still did all his trademark stuff. White didn't stand out at the level hoped for but part of this was having to follow a ridiculous four-way.

The jr. title match, the last of the five title changes, saw Will Ospreay winning over champion Marty Scurll, Hiromu Takahashi and Kushida was insane. In an incredible match that would be talked about as a match of the year candidate almost any other night, Hirooki Goto beat Minoru Suzuki to win the Never Open weight title in a hair vs. hair match. After Suzuki lost, he was dragged away by the Suzuki-gun members without getting his hair cut. Before he got to the

back, he recovered, pulled himself away from his teammates, and came to the ring, like he was a man of his word. He kicked away the chair Goto had for him to sit in, and instead put his own chair in the ring, and cut off much of his hair. The next day, at Dash, he showed up shaved bald.

Sanada & Evil won the IWGP heavyweight tag titles over Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr., in another excellent match, but some didn't like it because it had to follow an excellent Kota Ibushi vs. Cody match. A lot of people saw that as the break because it was so long with the only break between matches coming after the opening Rumble.

Toru Yano & Tomohiro Ishii & Baretta won the gauntlet, beating champions Tama Tonga & Tanga Loa & Bad Luck Fale in the final match to win the Never Open trios championship. But that was short-lived, as Tonga & Loa & Fale regained the ping pong ball championship at Dash the next day.

The Young Bucks won the IWGP jr. tag titles from Sho & Yoh, making it their seventh win of those belts. The win breaks the record they had previously held with Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan of holding six tag team titles in New Japan.

The gauntlet match wasn't much. It was easy to watch, but those matches are usually quick. It was okay, but nothing more. As usual, the Rumble itself was bad. They brought people in so quickly that it never slowed down, but was also never good. However, it had a great surprise finish.

The match was disappointing because people were waiting for surprises, and there were none most of the way. The first, Gino Gambino from Australia was somebody that nobody knew. With one person left to come in, the old UWF theme song played. TV announcer Kazuo Yamazaki, one of the major stars from that promotion, stood up and acted like he was taking off his jacket and shirt, when suddenly, Masahito Kakihara came out.

Kakihara's career ended years ago due to getting cancer and he had only done one match since 2006, on a UWF reunion show last year. Kakihara was much smaller, and wore a full long-sleeve shirt. He really looked about the same size as Cheeseburger. Kakihara threw out Tenzan and then used an STO to pin Cheeseburger for the big win which was one of the real highlights of the show. After the win, they showed Yamazaki at the desk in tears and a lot of other fans were as well. Kakihara put on a Yoshihiro Takayama T-shirt and spoke about Takayama's plight.

Besides Jericho vs. Naito, other key angles set up on the Dash show included Cody vs. Ibushi, Cody vs. Omega, Omega vs. White, Young Bucks vs. Sho & Yoh, Tanahashi vs. Minoru Suzuki, Ospreay vs. Hiromu Takahashi, Okada vs. Sanada and Goto vs. Evil. Most of those matches will be on the three New Beginnings shows, which will be 1/27 and 1/28 in Sapporo, and 2/10 in Osaka. All three shows will have English language commentary.

The exceptions are Jericho vs. Naito and Cody vs. Omega. Cody vs. Omega started when Cody attacked Ibushi after a ten-man tag match. Robinson tried to stop the attack but Cody laid him out with crossroads. Cody then grabbed a chair and went to hit Ibushi when Omega came out and pulled the chair away. The place went nuts for Omega as a babyface, really the biggest

of the Dash show. He then tried to do an interview but the mic didn't work. Finally he got a mic and said he was sick of The Bullet Club in-fighting and talking behind each others' back and that they need unity. He also said to do that, he wanted to bring in a new member, White. Omega said he could see all the potential in White and White reminds him of himself in 2015. He said White was the complete package and gave him a Bullet Club T-shirt. White put on the shirt. White went to do the "too sweet" but Omega said we don't do that anymore and they hugged. White then laid out Omega with the blade runner, which is the downward spiral.

The next day, at a press conference, White was with Okada and it was announced that White was joining Chaos. Although White didn't get over as big as hoped for at the Dome, he did come off as a star at the press conference noting that while he was joining Chaos, his long-term goal was to work with Okada and eventually beat him.

Later, after the show at a Bullet Club celebration filmed for "Being the Elite," Cody and Omega got into another argument and Omega walked out on the group, mad at Cody for attacking Ibushi and the Young Bucks and everyone else for not being there when White was beating him down.

Right now the plan is for the Omega vs. Cody match to take place on 4/7 in New Orleans, but I could see them also delaying that for the All In show since the date is before they can use Bryan Danielson and they need a main event of that caliber.

At the Dome, they announced most of the big shows for the first eight months of the year. Besides the New Beginnings shows, they announced the 46th anniversary show for 3/6 at the Ota Ward Gym in Tokyo, which is where that show usually takes place since that's where New Japan's first show was held. The New Japan Cup will be in March, a single elimination tournament with the finals on 3/21 in Niigata. Strong Style Evolved will be in Long Beach on 3/25. Sakura Generis is being moved up a week, to 4/1 at Sumo Hall in Tokyo. Most likely the main event will be the winner of the New Japan Cup facing the IWGP champion. There will be a big show called Wrestling Hinokoku in Kumamoto on 4/29. Dontaku in Fukuoka is now going to be two days, splitting up the title matches, with shows on both 5/3 and 5/4. The Best of the Super Junior tournament opens on 5/18. Dominion, which is the second biggest show of the year, takes place on 6/9 at Osaka Jo Hall. There will also be a major show called Kizuna Road on 6/15.

The G-1 Climax tournament will be from 7/14 to 8/12, so a four-week long tournament. The first two nights will be 7/14 and 7/15 at the Ota Ward Gym in Tokyo, followed by 7/16 in Sapporo. Sapporo is usually one of the biggest shows of the tournament.

The final three days will be 8/10, 8/11 and 8/12, all at Budokan Hall. Sumo Hall is being refurbished this summer, so the move to Budokan is not a sign they've outgrown Sumo Hall. It's simply that Budokan Hall, which holds about 4,000 to 5,000 more fans depending on the set-up, is the only alternative in Tokyo, since the experiment of taking G-1 to a domed baseball stadium didn't work a few years ago.

This will be the first pro wrestling event at Budokan since Kenta Kobashi's retirement show on

May 11, 2013, which set the building's attendance record. New Japan last ran there on June 13, 2003 for a show headlined by NWF champion Takayama beating Shinsuke Nakamura, which drew 8,500 fans.

The next thing on the agenda for New Japan is the Fantastica Mania tour which starts on 1/12 in Nagoya, and continues with smaller building shows on 1/14 in Kyoto, 1/15 in Takamatsu, 1/16 in Osaka and 1/17 in Toyama.

The last three shows will air live from Korakuen Hall on New Japan World, all starting at 4:30 a.m. Eastern time.

The 1/19 show has Fuego vs. Okumura, Kojima & Dragon Lee & Star Jr. & Hirai Kawato vs. Rush & Naito & Hiromu Takahashi & Bushi, Atlantis & Mistico & Volador Jr. & Drone vs. Ultimo Guerrero & Barbaro Cavernario & Puma & Disturbio, Angel de Oro defends the CMLL middleweight title against Cuatrero, Soberano Jr. defends the Mexican national welterweight title against Sanson and Niebla Roja defends the CMLL light heavyweight title against Gran Guerrero in a rematch of last year's CMLL anniversary show main event.

The 1/21 show has Drone & Star Jr. vs. Puma & Disturbio, Soberano Jr. & Fuego & Ryusuke Taguchi vs. Okumura & Sho & Yoh, Kojima & Atlantis & Kushida & Kawato vs. Rush & Naito & Hiromu Takahashi & Bushi, the first round matches of a brothers tag team tournament with Niebla Roja & Angel de Oro vs.; Ultimo Guerrero & Gran Guerrero and Dragon Lee & Mistico vs. Sanson & Cuatrero, plus a main event of Volador Jr. vs. Cavernario for the NWA historic welterweight title.

The 1/22 show has Taguchi & Fuego vs. Puma & Disturbio, Star Jr. & Jushin Liger & Tiger Mask & Kushida vs. Okumura & Rocky Romero & Sho & Yoh, the third place match in the brothers tag team tournament, Atlantis & Kawato vs. Cavernario & Gedo, Volador Jr. & Soberano Jr. & Drone vs. Naito & Hiromu Takahashi & Bushi, Kojima vs. Rush and the brothers tag team tournament finals.

The lineups aren't nearly as strong as usual. Usually you can count on a few super singles matches and high flying spectaculars like Volador vs. Ultimo Guerrero or Dragon Lee vs. Hiromu Takahashi or a big Mistico singles match. The closest is Volador vs Cavernario, which should be good. In addition, they are mostly resting up Tanahashi and Okada, who for whatever reason are only working the second night in Kyoto rather than the big shows. Kyoto's main event is Mistico & Niebla Roja & Tanahashi vs. Okada & Ultimo Guerrero & Gran Guerrero. Usually you get the New Japan top guys doing Lucha Libre and having fun with it. Still, these shows are traditionally a highlight of the year because of the fun atmosphere as the CMLL guys treat it like it's their highlight and usually go all out.

The 1/22 show will be Kawato's last show as he's going on excursion and starts about a week later for CMLL. Him leaving this early, at the age of 20, pretty much tells you what everyone already knows, and that's that he's going to be a big star.

After that comes the New Beginnings tour.

The first show is 1/27 with a 4 a.m. Eastern start time from the Hokkaido Sports Center in Sapporo. The card is Katsuya Kitamura vs. Michael Elgin, Tenzan & Kojima & Liger & Tiger Mask & Kushida vs. Takashi Iizuka & Yoshinobu Kanemaru & Taichi & Desperado & Taka Michinoku, Ishii & Yano vs. Yujiro Takahashi & Chase Owens, Tonga & Loa & Fale defend the six-man titles against Togi Makabe & Toa Henare (Henare's new ring name) & Taguchi, Ibushi & Robinson & David Finlay vs. Cody & Hangman Page & Scurll, Ospreay & Yoshi-Hashi vs. Naito & Hiromu Takahashi, Okada & Goto & Gedo vs. Sanada & Evil & Bushi, White & Sho & Yoh vs. Young Bucks & Omega, and Tanahashi vs. Suzuki for the IC title. This is the first singles match Tanahashi and Suzuki have done since their 2012 match of the year winner.

They also run the same building on 1/28 at 1 a.m. Eastern (or 10 p.m. on the West Coast, shortly after both the UFC and Takeover Philadelphia end). That card has Kitamura vs. Robinson, Liger & Tiger Mask & Taguchi & Shota Umino vs. Kanemaru & Taichi & Desperado & Taka Michinoku, Ishii & Yano vs Yujiro Takahashi & Hikuleo (the new name for Leo Tonga), Makabe & Tenzan & Kojima & Henare vs. Fale & Tonga & Loa & Owens, Tanahashi & Elgin vs. Suzuki & Iizuka, Ibushi & Finlay & Kushida vs. Cody & Page & Scurll, Okada & Goto & Yoshi-Hashi & Ospreay & Gedo vs. Naito & Evil & Sanada & Hiromu Takahashi & Bushi, Young Bucks defend the IWGP jr. tag titles against Sho & Yoh and Omega defends the U.S. title against White.

The Young Bucks, Omega, Cody, Page and Scurll are only working the Sapporo shows. Some of them will be working the Australia tour in February which at this point Omega is not scheduled for, and they'll likely all be on the ROH shows that haven't been announced that are tentatively scheduled for two dates in late February at Korakuen Hall.

Three more tour shows will be on New Japan World, with 2/5 and 2/6 Korakuen Hall shows with only Japanese language broadcasts, both at 4:30 a.m. Eastern time.

2/5 has Liger & Tiger Mask & Taguchi vs. Umino & Tetsuhiro Yagi & Ren Narita, Kojima & Elgin vs. Yujiro Takahashi & Hikuleo, Kitamura vs. Tenzan, Romero & Sho & Yoh vs. Taichi & Desperado & Michinoku, Robinson & Henare vs. Ishii & Yano, Tanahashi & Makabe & Kushida vs. Suzuki & Iizuka & Kanemaru, Finlay vs. White and a 10-man elimination match main event (New Japan usually does these well)_ with Okada & Goto & Yoshi-Hashi & Ospreay & Gedo vs. Naito & Sanada & Evil & Bushi & Hiromu Takahashi.

The 2/6 show has Liger & Tiger Mask & Kushida vs. Umino & Yagi & Narita, Tenzan & Elgin vs. Yujiro Takahashi & Hikuleo, Kojima vs. Kitamura, Romero & Sho & Yoh vs. Kanemaru & Desperado & Michinoku, Robinson & Finlay & Henare vs. White & Ishii & Yano, Tanahashi & Makabe & Taguchi vs. Suzuki & Iizuka & Taichi, Yoshi-Hashi & Ospreay & Gedo vs. Naito & Hiromu Takahashi & Bushi, and the main event is Evil & Sanada vs. Okada & Goto for the IWGP tag titles.

The story behind that match is that Sanada challenged Okada for the IWGP title and Evil challenged Goto for the Never title. Okada & Goto agreed to the matches if they would, in return, get a tag title match.

The other big show of the tour is 2/10 at the Edion Arena in Osaka, a show at 3 a.m. Eastern

time (so late Friday night on the West Coast) with Yuji Nagata vs. Kitamura, Sho & Yoh vs. Kanemaru & Desperado, Elgin & Robinson & Finlay vs. White & Ishii & Yano, Tanahashi & Makabe & Kushida & Taguchi vs. Suzuki & Iizuka & Taichi & Michinoku, Gedo vs. Bushi, Yoshi-Hashi vs. Naito, Ospreay vs. Hiromu Takahashi for the IWGP jr. title, Goto vs. Evil for the Never title and Okada vs. Sanada for the IWGP title.

The week started with the kickoff show on 1/3 at Differ Ariake, which is a long fan festival, built around in-ring interviews with the stars of the Dome show. Everyone came out for promos except Omega and Jericho, who weren't there. The idea is that the rest were sportsmen and could name call each other, but Omega and Jericho couldn't be in the same ring together. They sold 1,700 tickets in a way in advance sellout. The matches, featuring people not booked for matches at the Dome, saw Tiger Mask & Narita beat Liger & Yagi in 9:28 when Tiger Mask pinned Yagi after a Tiger driver; Kojima & Kitamura beat Tenzan & Tomoyuki Oka in 9:50 when Kojima pinned Oka with a lariat and Nagata & Kawato beat Nakanishi & Umino in 11:36 when Kawato pinned Umino with an enzuigiri.

The Tokyo Dome show came next.

1. Masahito Kakahara won the Rumble in 32:05. It opened with Katsuya Kitamura vs. Bushi. Bushi got a big reaction even though fans were mostly filing in at this point. Delirious was in next, followed by Leo Tonga. A spot that made no sense saw Tonga pinning Kitamura and Bushi broke it up. Why would you break up an elimination unless it was your own teammate? People were coming in at about 1:20 apart, but it was like a WWE Rumble (except far worse) and it was really just whenever. Chase Owens was next in. Delirious was the first guy pinned and Tiger Hattori totally blew the count. He counted to two, then stopped, and then counted all over again at 6:34. Don Callis said that they needed to give Tiger an Abacus. Nakanishi threw Bushi over the top rope at 7:00. Yuji Nagata was next in. Nakanishi got Nagata in the torture rack and threw him on Tonga. Taka Michinoku was next in. Nagata & Nakanishi pinned Tonga at 8:56. Nagata then pinned Nakanishi at 9:00 and everyone jumped on Nagata and pinned him at 9:03. Owens pinned Kitamura with a package piledriver in 9:19. I know the system but they really should have used this match to push Kitamura more. The people were wanting it. Yoshinobu Kanemaru and Desperado were the next two in. Kanemaru spit the booze in Owens' face and the Suzuki-gun guys all threw him out at 12:39. This left only Michinoku, Kanemaru and Desperado in. Jushin Liger was next in to the biggest pop of the show up to this point and he hit shote's on everyone. Kanemaru went after Liger's mask. Tiger Mask was next in. Gino Gambino, a stocky guy from Australia was next in. That got a pop in bars all over Australia, where the show was on at a decent hour and they actually knew who he was, unlike anyone in Tokyo. Kanemaru pinned Liger at 16:44 and Tiger Mask was thrown out seconds later. Gambino pinned Michinoku in 17:11. Toa Henare was next in. So it was Australia vs. New Zealand. Yoshi-Hashi was next in and was throwing hard chops. David Finlay was next in. Finlay gave Gambino a stunner and Henare pinned Gambino in 21:06. Yoshi-Hashi dropkicked Henare over the to in 21:28. In a big surprise, Finlay pinned Yoshi-Hashi in 21:40 even though Yoshi-Hashi's shoulder was up. Officiating wasn't the strong suit in this match.; Yujiro Takahashi came out with Pieter or Tokyo Latina or Muffin Ass or whatever name Fale's

girlfriend is going by this week. Callis, now that he's running a company, was far more under control. Actually, she was more clothed than usual. Yujiro clotheslined Finlay over the top in 22:44. Cheeseburger was in next and got a big pop. Next in was Satoshi Kojima. Hiroyoshi Tenzan was next in, followed by the big surprise in Kakahara. So it was down to Yujiro, Kojima, Tenzan, Cheeseburger and Kakahara. They put over Kakahara and his legendary super fast hands, but at 45 after cancer, he did his quick slaps and the fans were no longer fast. Really he was so small, he used to have this cool physique with the wide shoulders and small waist and not was covered from head to toe. But everyone understood. Kojima pinned Yujiro with a lariat in 29:27. Kojima was killing Cheeseburger with the machine gun chops. Kojima and Tenzan ended up bumping into each other and Kakahara gave them the slaps. Kojima went after Cheeseburger, who ducked, and Kojima went over the top in 31:22. Kakahara threw out Tenzan in 31:29, and then Kakahara hit the STO on Cheeseburger to win in 32:05. Kakahara did an interview thanking the fans, talking about beating cancer and then put on a Takayama T-shirt. Kakahara and Takayama were together in the old UWFI promotion where both started out. Kakahara said that some day Takayama will stand here in the Tokyo Dome ring. *1/2

2. Matt & Nick Jackson beat Sho & Yoh in 18:49 to win the IWGP jr. tag titles. Yoh used the sharpshooter in both Bucks, who had to make the ropes. Sho & Yoh did double running flip dives. Yoh started selling like he had a back injury. Nick gave him a German suplex on the apron to make it worse. Matt destroyed Rocky Romero with a running power bomb on the ramp. Romero just laid there for minutes. Matt power bombed Yoh on the apron but he kicked out of Nick's pin. Matt went to piledrive Yoh on the floor but he backdropped out of it and Matt took a bump on the ramp. Nick hit Yoh with a springboard dropkick. Nick went for a dive but Yoh moved and Nick took out Matt. Sho finally hot tagged in and Nick was giving Sho brutal elbows. Sho gave Matt two German suplexes and then German'd Matt & Nick at the same time. Lots of big spots. Yoh had a half crab on Matt while Sho had the same move on Nick. Matt was about to tap but Nick grabbed his hand and wouldn't let him tap. The story of the match was that Matt and Sho both were working in intense pain after getting their backs destroyed but neither would quit. It was the FU to people who say they don't sell or use psychology in their matches. Nick came back and did a crazy dive and Matt superkicked Yoh. They did the Meltzer driver on Yoh and Nick put the sharpshooter on Yoh for the submission. Excellent match, really would be the best match on most big shows. ****

3. Zack Sabre Jr. & Takashi Iizuka & Taichi beat Michael Elgin & Ray Rowe & Hanson in 6:05. This was the beginning of the Never six man title gauntlet. It was good action. War Machine went out with a great showing. Those guys always work hard and Elgin also always works hard. Hanson really stood out here. Sabre put a triangle on Rowe and then switched to a combination armbar and heel hook on Rowe for the submission. **1/2

4. Tomohiro Ishii & Toru Yano & Baretta beat Sabre Jr. & Iizuka & Taichi in :41. They had a big brawl to start. Desperado and Yoshinobu Kanemaru were helping out Suzuki-gun. But Yano immediately gave Taichi a low blow and cradled him. 3/4*

5. Ishii & Yano & Baretta beat Togi Makabe & Juice Robinson & Ryusuke Taguchi

in 3:30. It was fast paced. Robinson hit a plancha on both Ishii and Baretta. Taguchi started doing all the exaggerated Nakamura mannerisms and went for the bomb (Kinshasa) but Yano sidestepped him and cradled him. The finish came off great. *1/2

6. Ishii & Yano & Baretta beat Bad Luck Fale & Tama Tonga & Tanga Loa in 6:48 to win the Never Open weight six man titles. Loa gave Baretta a Death Valley bomb on the apron. They told the story of Ishii trying to suplex Fale, who is twice his size. This led to a big pop when he did it. Baretta came off the top with a moonsault but Tonga caught him in mid-air with the gunstun. That was great. Baretta pinned Tonga with the dudebuster. **3/4

7. Kota Ibushi beat Cody in 15:08. This was great as well. Brandi Rhodes came out as part of the act. She enhances Cody as far as coming off like a star, very much like Maryse did for Miz. Between Brandi, and the way Cody carried himself, he came across as a much bigger star than in his previous trips here. Ibushi did a pescado onto Cody and Brandi. The idea is that Ibushi knocked out Brandi with the dive and he acted like he was devastated. He picked her up as to carry her to the back. Cody sucker punched him and he dropped Brandi, with the idea Cody didn't even care about his wife. Then Cody and Brandi started laughing like it was all planned. Cody hit Ibushi three times with chair shots and missed a fourth. Ibushi did his triangle moonsault to the floor. Ibushi did all his great moves. Ibushi tried a suplex but Brandi grabbed Ibushi's legs to block it. Cody snapped Ibushi's neck on the top rope. Cody did a crossroads off the apron and Ibushi's sell job on it was fantastic, looking like he landed on his head on the floor. This led to a great count out tease. Cody did a springboard huracanrana for a near fall. Ibushi countered a crossroads by giving Cody a lawn dart spot into the corner. They traded shots. Ibushi went for the kawagoe (knee) but Cody ducked and hit a lariat. Cody missed a disaster kick and Ibushi came back with a German suplex, the kawagoe and Phoenix splash for the win. ****1/4

8. Seiya Sanada & Evil won the IWGP tag titles from Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr. in 14:14. Archer & Smith came out fast doing the killer bomb on Evil. Smith slammed Sanada over the top rope to the floor. Smith & Archer were out there killing Hirai Kawato, Tomoyuki Oka and Ren Narita outside the ring. Archer choke slammed Evil off the apron onto the prelim wrestlers at ringside. Archer gave Sanada a brutal clothesline. Sanada was selling for several minutes including taking a Billy Robinson double-arm suplex from Smith. Archer gave Sanada a uranage. Evil hot tagged in. Archer did a combination Spanish fly and superplex off the top rope on Evil. Sanada and Smith did a great high spot and Smith moonsaulted him. Sanada came back and did a moonsault into a skull end. Archer choke slammed Sanada but he flipped and landed on his feet. But Archer hit the choke slam. Smith used the Nagata back suplex on Sanada and they did a version of the Hart attack on Evil. They hit the killer bomb on Sanada and he kicked out. Evil hit Everything is Evil on Archer and then they used the magic killer on Smith. Smith kicked out of the pin. Finally Sanada pinned Smith after a moonsault. The story and work here was great. Archer & Smith looked strong in losing and Sanada was selling like crazy before coming back to win. ****

9. Hirooki Goto beat Minoru Suzuki to win the Never Open weight title in a hair vs.

hair match in 18:05. Suzuki, who probably had his best outing of the year aside from the Okada matches, decked Goto with a slap right away. Goto came back with a hard slap of his own. Suzuki got him in the choke several times. Goto sold like he was out, eyes rolled back, limp, and the doctor came in. This was kind of overkill because if it was real and he was out cold and the doctor was in, the match should be over. Suzuki threw the doctor out of the ring. Goto was out for too long for the match to logically continue. That's about the only negative thing I could say about the match aside from a too brutal head-butt late. Goto came back but Suzuki laughed and wouldn't sell. Goto would throw hard chops and Suzuki would just kill him. Goto went for an ushigoroshi but Suzuki turned it into a guillotine and choked him again. Goto powered out. Suzuki got a choke and Goto finally hit the ushigoroshi. Taka Michinoku, Desperado and Yoshinobu Kanemaru all came out. The key is that the rules of this match were no seconds allowed. This would have been the perfect time to Katsuyori Shibata to show up. Honestly, it would been the hottest thing on the show, but he wasn't there. The ring boys went to stop them from interfering and Taichi came out. Yoshi-Hashi ran in. Goto nailed Taichi. Suzuki did an incredible slapping sequence on Goto. It was ridiculous. Goto was bleeding from the mouth. Suzuki went for the Gotch piledriver, but Goto got out of it and hit Suzuki with a brutal clothesline. Suzuki came back with a head-butt and top rope guillotine. Goto used an ushigoroshi off the middle rope. Suzuki hit a sick elbow, but Goto fired back. There was a double head-butt spot. Actually, one of the head-butts they did was not a good idea. It wasn't Shibata on Okada but it was a bad klunk. Another head-butt was a lot safer. Suzuki hit one of the most amazing dropkicks you'll ever see. Goto used a GTR to the front and then a regular GTR and got the pin. Suzuki was dragged off by his Suzuki-gun teammates and when he was near the back, it was like he recovered, and lived up to his word. He broke away, came back, kicked away the chair Goto set up, and put up his own chair. He then sat in the chair and cut off most of his hair. ****1/2

10. Will Ospreay won the IWGP jr. title for a second time in a four-way over champion Marty Scurll, Kushida and Hiromu Takahashi in 21:18. This was insane. Takahashi was really over. Ospreay came out all purple. Ospreay was the star of this match but Scurll and Takahashi were fantastic. Kushida is top ten in the world easy and did his part yet he ended up the most overlooked guy here. Just never ending big moves at a break-neck pace. Kushida did a flip plancha onto Takahashi and Scurll. Ospreay climbed up the lighting grid and did a moonsault off the grid onto everyone. Ospreay did a springboard missile dropkick into an armbar by Kushida. Ospreay did a moonsault but Scurll caught him in a chicken wing and Kushida broke it up with a moonsault. Ospreay did a shooting star but Scurll caught him with an uppercut and a neckbreaker for a near fall. Scurll used Ospreay's own Oscutter on him but Takahashi saved. Scurll taped Takahashi to the barricade with duct tape so he was out of commission for several minutes. Scurll then did the broken fingers spot on Takahashi. Kushida broke Scurll's fingers and did a flying armbar which he turned into a triangle. Scurll threw powder in Kushida's eyes but Kushida still hit the back to the future on Scurll and Ospreay saved with a Paul Robinson special. Takahashi finally broke free to a big pop and used a sunset flip power bomb over the top rope onto Ospreay, then Scurll and hit the time bomb on Scurll. Takahashi did a tombstone on Ospreay and a missile dropkick on him, followed by a death

Valley bomb on the apron on Scurll. Kushida did a sunset flip power bomb on Takahashi on the apron and Ospreay did a springboard shooting star press on Scurll and Kushida and an inverted 450 on Takahashi for a near fall. He missed the oscutter. Scurll brought in the umbrella and nailed Ospreay and Kushida in the face. But Ospreay hit the Spanish fly and Oscutter to pin Scurll, with the story being that Scurll always beats Ospreay in the big matches. ****3/4

11. Hiroshi Tanahashi beat Jay White to keep the IC title in 19:43. This match was flat to some but the first time I saw it I thought it was really good. The second time I watched it with the U.S. announcing, without having to follow the prior match, it was far better. I think the worst match voting was a combo of White not standing out the way people hoped he would, Tanahashi selling the knee so much which he had to, and really coming off the high of the previous match and very few could have followed that. Tanahashi missed a pescado and was selling his right knee, which is the bad one. White worked on it including an Indian deathlock. Tanahashi came back and worked on White's knee starting with the dragon screw. Tanahashi even with all his injuries still did a great looking high fly flow to the floor. White did a great German suplex and Tanahashi rolled out of the ring. He did a brainbuster on the apron. They got lost here as White went to the top rope and waited for Tanahashi to get up. Tanahashi was still selling so he climbed down. White taunted him and Tanahashi decked him with a slap. White used a head-and-arm suplex, a Saito suplex and a Death Valley driver for near falls. He missed a missile dropkick and Tanahashi went back to working on White's knee. Tanahashi did a twist and shout off the middle rope, two sling blades and crossbody off the top rope. But Tanahashi missed the high fly flow. White got him in the crucifix and was throwing elbows like Gary Goodridge in an early UFC with Paul Herrera. This was the spot he knocked Tanahashi out in an angle at the end of the year. But Tanahashi kicked out of the pin. Tanahashi came back to win with a dragon suplex, a hard slap, the high fly flow to the back and another high fly flow. Tanahashi's nose was bleeding when this was over. ***3/4

12. Kenny Omega pinned Chris Jericho in 34:36 to retain the U.S. title in a no DQ match. Jericho came out to his own song, "Judas." Omega came out with the Young Bucks dressed in an Osiris costume from Destiny. Jericho attacked him right away. They had a pull-apart. They went at a fast pace. Omega went for a springboard plancha over the guard rail but Jericho moved and Omega crashed through the American announcing table, taking out Don Callis. Jericho used the Walls of Jericho. He also threw down ref Red Shoes and then attacked Red Shoes' son Shota Umينو and put him in the Walls of Jericho after he'd taken out his father. He changed it to the lion tamer on Umينو until Omega made the save. They brawled on the floor including Omega coming off the lighting structure with a double foot stomp onto a table on top of Jericho. Omega was bleeding from the mouth by this point. Jericho suplexed him on the floor. Jericho came back and power bombed Omega on the floor. They traded stiff shots. Omega hit the Terminator dive followed by a facebuster and a neckbreaker over the knee. Jericho escaped a snap dragon suplex and put Omega in the Walls of Jericho. Omega crawled to the corner and got the bottle of the freezing spray they use to numb an injury and sprayed it in Jericho's eyes. Jericho came back and threw Omega's head into a chair and Omega came up bleeding. Jericho was pounding on the cut. Omega came back with two snap dragon suplexes

and a sin kick. He did another snap dragon but Jericho hit him with a brutal chair shot to the head. That wasn't good. Omega was bleeding like crazy. Jericho kept using chair shots to the back and jabbed the chair to Omega's throat. Omega dropkicked a chair into Jericho's face and hit a V trigger, knocking Jericho off the ropes and through a table. Jericho was cut from the left eye. Omega used V triggers and double arm piledriver but Jericho kicked out. Jericho got the Walls of Jericho back on. At this point Jericho was cut near his butt and bleeding from the mouth as well. He turned it into a lion tamer but Omega made the ropes. Jericho decked Red Shoes again. He went for a codebreaker but Omega blocked and hit two V triggers and finally hit the One Winged Angel, but Jericho got his hand on the ropes. Omega went to the top but Jericho scooped his leg and crotched him. Jericho went for a top rope huracanrana but Omega blocked and dropped him on his head. Omega went for you can't escape but Jericho hit the codebreaker. Jericho kept hitting him with a chair and telling him to stay down. He went for a lionsault but Omega threw the chair at him, and hit a One Winged Angel, dropping Jericho on the chair for the pin. *****

13. Kazuchika Okada pinned Tetsuya Naito in 34:26 to retain the IWGP

heavyweight title. Okada came out with long pants for a change. The crowd live was more hyped for this than anything on the show. Both guys looked like they had cut weight, Okada more than Naito, knowing they had to be in their best shape for a bout like this. They had to start slow as fans were coming off a high of the finish of the prior match. Naito gained a first advantage with a neckbreaker over the guard rail outside the ring. He used a missile dropkick and spit on Okada. Okada did a sprint where he ran around three sides of the ring and kicked Naito in the face, then dropped him with a sick draping DDT. They traded moves, including Okada doing the Randy Savage elbow. Okada got the cobra clutch, and while Naito promised a counter, he couldn't get out, but did make the ropes. Naito did a reverse huracanrana off the top rope and Gloria for a near fall. Naito then missed the stardust press. They pounded on each other with Naito beating him down and hitting a koppo kick. Okada came back with woo dropkick. Naito went for a superplex but Okada threw elbows that knocked him halfway across the ring. Okada missed a missile dropkick. Naito went to the top. Okada tried to German suplex him but Okada held onto the ropes to block it. Okada powered Naito off into a German suplex. Okada went for the rainmaker but Okada ducked and hit the flying forearm. Okada hit the rainmaker but Naito kicked out. Naito got out of a tombstone piledriver attempt. He missed an enzuigiri and Okada went back to the cobra clutch. Naito reversed and hit destino. They traded forearms with Naito getting the better of it. They were trading elbows with the story being that Okada was seemingly done and his elbows were weak. Naito spit on him and slapped him hard in the face. Naito went for a huracanrana but Okada turned it into a DDT and hit the rainmaker. He went for another one but Naito ducked and hit destino, but Okada kicked out again. Naito hit a step up enzuigiri but Okada finally hit a dropkick every bit as good as the one Suzuki threw earlier, and hit the tombstone. He went for a rainmaker, but Naito got out and hit destino again. He went for a second one, but Okada blocked it, hit a spinning tombstone piledriver and the rainmaker for the pin. After the match Gedo did a promo followed by Okada, with Okada thanking everyone for the big crowd and told the people how many were for Naito and many were for him but it was his night. He said that he and Naito will probably cross paths again at

the Tokyo Dome in the main event some day. He said once again he'd make it rain, not just cash, but emotions and happiness. He pointed to the few empty spots in the building and said that his goal is to fill those spots and sell the building out. ****1/2

JANUARY 4, 2019

Notes: As big of an event this show was, and being the first legitimate sellout of the building in 17 years was monumental, much of the big news took place during the week. The Young Bucks, Cody and Hangman Page, whose ROH deals had expired, released a video in front of the Tokyo Dome at midnight on New Year's Eve with the announcement of All Elite Wrestling. At the time, the idea was for AEW to try and work with New Japan. While there were issues, in the sense that the Young Bucks and Cody had become more valuable on the free market than New Japan was paying them, they all enjoyed Japan. Cody had wanted to do G-1, since the year before he got a recurring role in the TV show "Arrow" that caused him to miss it. The Young Bucks had just been moved up to heavyweight, a move long overdue and meant higher profile matches in the tag team division. The other key piece in the puzzle was Omega, who for the third straight year was in the most important business match on the show, and this time as the defending IWGP heavyweight champion. Omega-Okada, the best match in Tokyo Dome history two years earlier, had become a generational rivalry, arguably even surpassing Okada vs. Tanahashi, in there with the likes of Lou Thesz vs. Pat O'Connor, Jack Brisco vs. Dory Funk Jr., Ric Flair vs. Ricky Steamboat, Jumbo Tsuruta vs. Genichiro Tenryu and Mitsuharu Misawa vs. Kenta Kobashi. Their match two years earlier had put both on the map as perhaps the two best wrestlers of the era, and the match was later surpassed twice, by a 60:00 draw in Osaka in 2017 and a two out of three fall match where Omega won the title that went more than 69:00. The story of the year was Hiroshi Tanahashi. He lost a few times early, which turned him into the sentimental favorite going into G-1. If there was an example of the genius of Gedo's booking, the 2018 G-1 was it. Gedo had booked Tanahashi was beaten up and past his prime, but in a way that made him the crowd favorite on opening day, largely because they didn't think he had a chance. Tanahashi ran through the tournament, losing only once, to Jay White, and going to a draw with Okada to finish 7-1-1. Then in the finals, he beat Kota Ibushi in one of the greatest matches in company history. Omega vs. Tanahashi was promoted as a battle of ideologies, new school vs. old school. In reality, this was an exaggerated version of things both men really believed about what pro wrestling should be. Tanahashi favored a mix of his childhood idol, Tatsumi Fujinami, and his older idol, Shawn Michaels, and in doing so, became something of an updated version of Bret Hart. Omega was more of a creator, inspired by his own life experiences in sports, Aja Kong vs. Manami Toyota and video games. The plan was for Omega to win, and leading to Omega vs. Okada in Madison Square Garden in April. The plan at the time made all the sense in the world, even if the sold out Dome crowd was there to see Tanahashi win the title. New Japan pretty much blew off the AEW crew. They did have to stick with ROH through MSG, and there was going to be bitterness from the ROH side over losing the key talent. Still, Omega was never an ROH guy. New Japan pulled everyone but Omega from New Year's Dash, which was a slap in the face, and then pulled Omega as well. The finish was changed to Tanahashi winning, which Omega had pretty much suggested was the best thing to do. There were a

number of other things behind-the-scenes. Omega was just trying to get through the week, and New Japan playing it off like losing the Bucks, Page and Cody was fine since Omega was the star, didn't sit well with Omega who always felt the Bucks were underutilized in the last years of the run. New Japan officials felt that in the end Omega was not going to be as loyal to his friends as everyone else thought. Then they were blindsided when Omega said he was leaving the company in an interview with Tokyo Sports that caused panic within the company. He had been talking with AEW, WWE and New Japan, and when it came to offers, felt New Japan was third best out of three.

New Japan legitimately sold out the Tokyo Dome for the first time in 17 years on 1/4 with WrestleKingdom 13, which featured seven title changes.

For reasons I can't fully explain, because many have had told me they've had constant problems and others haven't had any, New Japan World hasn't worked for me on multiple devices except sporadically since I came back from Japan. It's buffered so bad and so frequently that I'm almost ready to drop it, and you can imagine what that would take.

I did see the show live and it was a great event, not the best Tokyo Dome show ever, but among the best ones. The main event where Hiroshi Tanahashi won the IWGP title from Kenny Omega was pretty much a consensus view from regulars that it was one of the best matches in Tokyo Dome history. I don't want to rate it until seeing it closely but it was among the best live matches I've ever seen, and maybe the best. If I'd say the three best Tokyo Dome matches I've seen were Manami Toyota vs. Aja Kong in 1994, Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Kota Ibushi in 2015 and Kenny Omega vs. Kazuchika Okada in 2017, I'd from a live experience rate it higher than Toyota vs. Kong and I'm not sure about whether it was better than Nakamura vs. Ibushi. Having seen a ridiculous three ****3/4 matches over the previous 36 hours, a Kento Miyahara Triple Crown title defense against Kai at Korakuen Hall the previous afternoon, and both Tetsuya Naito's IC title win over Chris Jericho and Will Ospreay's Never title win over Ibushi on the same show, this match was clearly well ahead of any of those bouts.

What kept the show from perhaps being the best Dome show in history is that they made the decision that the show had to end at 9 p.m., so aside from the three top matches that were given time, every match and the show itself felt rushed. While five hours is more than long enough for a show, this is the one show where an extra hour would have been a positive because of the caliber of the performers.

Time also could have been used better, in the sense they could have put a second match or even a third match on the per-show where they had nearly 30 minutes of down time from the first match to the second match. If they then had four hours for seven or eight matches, the rushed matches could have each had several minutes and made them that much better.

Still, it feels silly to complain when a show is that good.

New Japan is in a very unique position right now. The company is the hottest it has been, and during the show they announced the most ambitious worldwide schedule in their history, including Tokyo Dome shows on both 1/4 and 1/5 in 2020, as well as major events in Dallas and

London.

If things were remaining unchanged, this would come across like a huge year for growth. But at least for right now, it looks like the company is losing Kenny Omega, Cody, The Young Bucks, Hangman Page and Kushida. Chris Jericho also worked the last match of his current deal, although both sides are interested in continuing and there has been talk of Jericho doing future programs with Tanahashi over the IWGP title as well as Okada and possibly Minoru Suzuki. Jericho and Omega, along with Jay White all cut promos after the show wanting Tanahashi in title matches.

Kushida will work the current Fantastica Mania tour and his last date will be 1/29 at Korakuen Hall. He asked for a singles match with Tanahashi, which would be his first and only singles match of his career against him.

Takashi Iizuka, 52, will retire with his final show being on 2/21 at Korakuen Hall, after a more than 32-year career.

Tiger Hattori, 73, who refereed a couple of matches at the Dome, told Cody and Juice Robinson that their match would be the last Tokyo Dome match he would ever officiate in.

With the departures, lots of questions come as to whether they will provide a Madison Square Garden lineup on 4/6 that will live up to expectations, since the key guys who were the catalysts for the quick sellout are unlikely to appear on the show. Obviously the situation with Omega, the key player and biggest draw in the U.S. market on the roster, is up in the air right now.

The past few months have shown New Japan preparing for this. They switched the Bullet Club moniker to the Tama Tonga, Tanga Loa, Taiji Ishimori and Bad Luck Fale group, and did an angle to put Chase Owens and Yujiro Takahashi back in the group. Marty Scurll, on the other hand, was not part of the angle and he, like all of the wrestle who weren't signed, did not appear at New Year's Dash. Jericho flew home before the show while the AEW crew were all pulled from the show about a week ahead of time, and Omega was pulled a few days ahead of time.

Jay White has gotten a monster push as a top foreign heel, including beating Okada at the Tokyo Dome. Will Ospreay got the Never title and beat Ibushi in a match where Ibushi went out on a stretcher.

The story behind that is the stretcher job was a work, for two reasons. The first was to get Ospreay over as a stronger performer, to start moving him into the heavyweight title picture. The second is that it puts heat on a program with Ibushi which should lead to more matches between the two this year, which should be among the year's best.

However, the Ibushi concussion story is true. The elbow to the back of the head by Ospreay, which Ibushi sold as if he was knocked out, was pure sell and a planned spot. It was designed to make you think Ibushi was knocked out and they went right to the finish. In actuality, Ibushi did suffer a minor concussion on a kick in the corner by Ospreay earlier in the match. He's off the next series of big shows to sell the stretcher job and also because Ospreay isn't on the next tour due to commitments to the World of Sport U.K. tour.

Ibushi may also have an eye injury. It was feared he had a detached retina the day after the show but it sounds like that wasn't the case. He's healing up well and while not 100 percent, he hopes to be able to start back training within a few days.

The Tokyo Dome paid attendance was 38,162. Unlike in past years, there was very few free tickets out, as the building total was about 40,000, which, with the elaborate stage, was all that could fit in. We didn't get a gate, but with ticket prices being more expensive than ever before, it was likely the largest gate in Japanese wrestling history, and certainly the largest since the Antonio Inoki retirement show in 1998.

Of that number, about 6,000 were non-Japanese. There were sections with nothing but foreigners. At the 1/3 Stardom show, in a building that probably had an overflow of 413 people (standing room everywhere, every aisle full), we met fans from Hong Kong, China, The Philippines, Ireland, the U.K., Australia, Canada, Japan, Brazil and the U.S. It was by far the largest contingent of non-Japanese ever at a pro wrestling event in Japan.

New Japan World increased 20 percent in subscriptions to 120,000 over the WrestleKingdom build period, with the gain more outside of Japan than inside, similar to last year. Paid streaming services have never caught on in Japan like the U.S. and even though NJPW World's numbers are less than 10 percent of WWE Networks, it is one of the biggest streaming services in Japan. Still, they are hovering close to a 50/50 split, with Japanese subscribers not having that much of an edge over non-Japanese subscribers.

The gain wasn't as much as last year when the Jericho vs. Omega match had so much interest outside of Japan that it brought subscriptions from 60,000 to 100,000. But within Japan, there was more interest in this show, and the storyline of Tanahashi going from injured and battered, winning the IWGP title and losing only once, then beating Okada and White to lead to the reclamation of the title over Omega. There was also far more publicity. Having been in Japan, you saw more signs of wrestling walking the streets than in years, and on New Year's Eve as just before midnight, the Tanahashi vs. Omega contract signing in Shibuya had an estimated 150,000 people watching. New Japan said it was the most people to watch a sports contract signing in history. Now, it wasn't as if those were people who were there specifically to see it, as there were about 1 million people on New Year's Eve congregated in Shibuya, but the contract signing was also covered by a number of mainstream media outlets and local and national television stations because Shibuya on New Year's Eve is the equivalent to Times Square in the U.S.

Under any circumstances, given the storyline, it was time for Tanahashi to win. For New Japan, the best course of action would be for it to lead to Omega winning it back in Madison Square Garden, but obviously that is up in the air right now.

While Tanahashi's win was clearly the big story of the night, and his win was the biggest pop, the other major pops were for Okada returning to his short trunks and blond hair, and the place went nuts when they announced the 1/5 Tokyo Dome show.

It's actually a funny story to me, because we wrote over-and-over how ridiculous it was that

Dash on 1/5 was at Korakuen Hall. With only 2,000 seats and 1,730 tickets to sell, there were virtually no foreigners in the building even though there were 6,000 at the Dome that all would have wanted to attend, along with several thousand Japanese. The promotion itself based on tickets orders, estimated they could have sold 20,000 tickets and it was noted that Korakuen Hall was booked on the date more than a year in advance.

I was pretty much told ahead of time that in 2020 they would be in a bigger building, but they kept the second Dome quiet from everyone. When announcing the schedule for the first eight months of the year, they then talked about WrestleKingdom 14 on January 4, 2020, and it was, "well, we already know that." Then they started talking about New Year's Dash at Korakuen Hall, and I thought, I can't believe they are doing this. Then the tape in the building acted like there was a malfunction, and they announced 1/5 and showed the photo of the Tokyo Dome. I'd say the biggest surprise was White actually pinning Okada.

The first 30 minutes of WrestleKingdom was a gauntlet match to determine who would face Tama Tonga & Tanga Loa & Taiji Ishimori for the Never trios titles the next night at New Year's Dash. Ryusuke Taguchi & Togi Makabe & Toru Yano won. In the title match the next day, Makabe was on the top rope for the kneedrop on Loa but the ref was distracted, Takahashi shoved Makabe off the top rope, Owens gave Makabe a package piledriver and Loa pinned Makabe with apeshit. Owens and Takahashi then made up with the rest of the Bullet Club.

1. Yuji Nagata & Jeff Cobb & David Finlay beat Hangman Page & Yujiro Takahashi & Marty Scurll in 4:39. This was the beginning of a gauntlet match for a shot at the trios title. Page and Takahashi were arguing. Page shoved Takahashi into a schoolboy by Finlay. Owens was doing commentary at ringside and tried to interfere and ended up walking off. Page had that look in his face where you could tell he was thinking this could be the end of the line for me here. It felt terribly rushed. *3/4

2. Nagata & Cobb & Finlay beat Hirooki Goto & Baretta & Chuckie T in 7:30. Some cool stuff but also rushed. T did a flip dive on Cobb and Baretta followed with an Asai moonsault. Cobb did a back suplex on both Baretta & Chuckie at the same time which got over. T hit a short piledriver on Finlay, but missed a moonsault and Finlay pinned him with an inside cradle. ***

3. Minoru Suzuki & Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Jr. beat Nagata & Cobb & Finlay in 2:44. Nagata and Suzuki slapped the hell out of each other. They were great together. With Nagata and Suzuki fighting outside the ring, Smith & Archer used the killer bomb on Finlay for the pin. *1/2

4. Toru Yano & Togi Makabe & Ryusuke Taguchi beat Suzuki & Smith & Archer in 8:09. Suzuki chased after the announcers. Archer did the Undertaker old school ropewalk. Yano and Taguchi both did their comedy. Yano pinned Smith after a low blow. ***

5. Will Ospreay beat Kota Ibushi in 18:13 to win the Never Open weight title. A completely insane match. Ibushi went for the moonsault off the middle rope to the floor and Ospreay kicked him on the way over. Ospreay used a space flying Tiger drop. So many stories

including Ibushi using the Bom a Ye (Kinshasa) which is the move Nakamura beat him in their famous 2019 Dome match. Ibushi was bleeding from the mouth from a kick, which may have been the one that caused the mild concussion. Even though Ibushi did get hurt, overall they worked a smarter and less risky match than you'd think, and a better match. Ospreay did the spinning back elbow and the storm breaker for the win. ****3/4

6. Bushi & Shingo Takagi won the IWGP jr. tag titles in a three-way over champions Yoshinobu Kanemaru & Desperado and Sho & Yoh in 6:50. All action but felt rushed. Sho & Yoh did a double flip dive and Sho German suplexed two guys at the same time. Shingo and Sho came across as the stars of the match. Bushi hit a tope on Yoh and Shingo pinned Sho with the last of the dragon, which is a pyramid driver. ***1/4

7. Zack Sabre Jr. beat Tomohiro Ishii in 11:35 to win the British heavyweight title. Sabre did the submission clinic. At one point Ishii used a superplex and Sabre rolled right into a twisting armlock. It was a super match but again felt ended way before it should have peaked as Sabre used an octopus and a double armlock submission. People didn't think this was the finish. ****1/4

8. Evil & Sanada won the IWGP tag titles over champions Tama Tonga & Tonga Loa and The Young Bucks in 10:15. Same story. Great action but too short. The Young Bucks did their regular stuff but Sanada was the star of this match, including a spot where he hit four straight pescados, after doing his double leapfrog and dropkick spot with Tonga. Matt was pinned clean after the magic killer by Evil & Sanada, after Evil had hit It's Evil on Tonga. Sanada then pinned Matt after a moonsault. ****

9. Juice Robinson pinned Cody to win the U.S. title in 9:02. A lot of people went to the concession stand after the tag title match and they rushed right intoo this one and didn't give them much time. Brandi Rhodes speared Robinson with the idea she's got a metal plate in her shoulder and did ground and pound. Tiger Hattori threw her out. Robinson kicked out of crossroads. Robinson hit crossroads on Cody for a near fall. Cody used a disaster kick and hit pulp friction on Robinson for a near fall. Cody whipped Robinson with his eight belt. Robinson hit the knockout punch and hit pulp friction twice for the pin. ***

10. Taiji Ishimori beat Kushida to win the IWGP jr. title in 11:17. Same story, as they had potential for a great match but it was too short. Kushida had the best ring entrance of the show as a little kid came out with his face and hair somehow made to look exactly like Kushida. Taguchi came out as Doc Brown from Back to the Future. Then a bunch of smoke came and the kid disappeared and the real Kushida came out. The match was very good, but with these two at the Dome you expect great. Kushida finally hit the punch but Ishimori came back with a jumping knee and got the pion clean after the bloody cross. ***1/2

11. Jay White pinned Kazuchika Okada in 14:18. Okada got the biggest reaction by far up to this point even before he showed he was back to his shorts. With the exception of Tanahashi and Omega he got the biggest reaction, significantly more than Naito. The match had a very different and bigger buzz than anything up to this point. Okada is really at a different level from

all but a few guys in the business. His job was to get White over and he did it here. White back suplexed him over the top rope. At one point Okada sprinted on the floor and flew over the barricade with a crossbody on White and Gedo. He did the Randy Savage elbow and went for the rainmaker, but White hit a downward spiral and German suplex. White went for a chair shot as Gedo distracted the ref, but Okada moved and White collided with Gedo and Okada hit a dropkick to the back. He hit another dropkick and went for the rainmaker, but White used a cobra clutch suplex dropping Okada on his head and a kiwi crusher for a near fall. Okada hit a tombstone but missed the dropkick. Okada hit another dropkick but white got out of the rainmaker and Okada out of the blade runner. After a ton of reversals, Okada hit the rainmaker, went for a second and White had the blade runner and got the pin. The last few minutes in particular were fantastic. ****1/2

12. Tetsuya Naito beat Chris Jericho in a no DQ match to win the IC title in 22:35. I

wouldn't say this was better than Jericho-Omega last year (although many thought it was), but this was easily Jericho's best individual performance since his return to New Japan and one of the best of his career. He was almost like Tanahashi in the sense every single thing he did was done at the perfect pace, not too slow, not too fast, and every move had meaning and made sense. He controlled the audience as good as anyone but Tanahashi. He also had more leeway with the no DQ stip, but there was no point in him trying to do the same style match everyone else was doing. Plus, this match went the perfect length for how it was paced. Naito undid the turnbuckle padding in one corner early and hit Jericho with the padding. Naito went for a tope but Jericho hit him with a kendo stick as he came through the ropes. Jericho worked on him with the kendo stick and dominated for several minutes. Naito took a great bump head over heels on the apron from a springboard dropkick by Jericho. Jericho dropped Naito right on the top of his head on the table, which ended up with a hole in it from Naito's head, using a DDT. Visually it looked unbelievable. Naito does that too much and he doesn't need to and unfortunately it'll probably catch up with him. Jericho used the Walls of Jericho the first time but Naito eventually flipped out of it. Naito blocked a codebreaker and hit a tornado DDT. Jericho came back with the Walls of Jericho in the middle. Somehow Naito was able to reach for the kendo stick and hit Jericho with it several times to break it up. Naito, who is the big hero to the players on the Hiroshima Carp baseball team, got the kendo stick, and acted like it was a baseball bat. He did the high kick swing made famous by Sadaharu Oh, who is one of Japan's biggest sports stars of all-time (he's like their Babe Ruth, bigger than even Baba or Inoki, and still holds the all-time Japanese home run record with 868 in his career). Naito hit Jericho with it and then did went for the home run with the Oh mannerisms, but Jericho ducked and hit the codebreaker for a near fall. Jericho got frustrated and threw eight chairs into the rig. Jericho hit him with a chair. Naito came back with a DDT on the chairs and threw the chairs out of the rig. Naito used a codebreaker but Jericho kicked out. Jericho threw a chair into Naito's face. Naito gave Jericho a German suplex on the chairs. Jericho hit the codebreaker and Naito kicked out. Jericho grabbed the belt and went to use it, but Naito ducked and gave Jericho a hot shot right to the uncovered top turnbuckle he exposed early in the match. Naito grabbed the belt and gave Jericho a running belt shot at the destino for the pion. ****3/4

13. Hiroshi Tanahashi pinned Kenny Omega to win the IWGP title in 39:13.

Hopefully I can run this down next week. Live I went *****¹/₂, and most of the feedback was in that range (mostly *****¹/₄ to *****) but I need to be able to watch it without interruption to give a fair rating. In the building this was maybe the best live match I ever saw. I thought it was better than the Toyota vs. Yamada hair match, but it didn't have the screaming girls heat. It was not as emotional as the famous Tsuruta vs. Misawa match, but it was a much better worked match. It was well above any Flair-Steamboat and I saw two of the best Flair-Steamboats in history. Tanahashi is a really special performer live. It's like a combo of the style of Steamboat and the charisma of Savage or Hogan and the ring IQ of Danielson. He's better live in a big match situation than any wrestler who has the rep for being the greatest ever, more than Misawa or Tsuruta and maybe Kobashi even. Omega is a very different great big match wrestler, more spectacular and off the charts in ways Tanahashi isn't and that maybe only Okada is. It was amazing story telling. Highlights included Tanahashi reverting to what he didn't believe in and Omega's style by putting Omega on a table and doing a high fly flow to the floor, only to have Omega move and him crash through it. The way the two built the struggle for the top rope dragon superplex was amazing. Omega had only done it with Okada and everyone freaked out when he kept going for the full nelson and Tanahashi kept fighting it. Omega kept at it and actually hit it, but Tanahashi did flip enough to where he flipped over the took it on his face as opposed to on his head like Okada did a few years ago. Tanahashi won with the high fly flow, did a long promo in the ring that nobody left during, really doing a Hogan level show closing as far as audience involvement, and was out of the ring at 8:58 p.m., exactly on cue.